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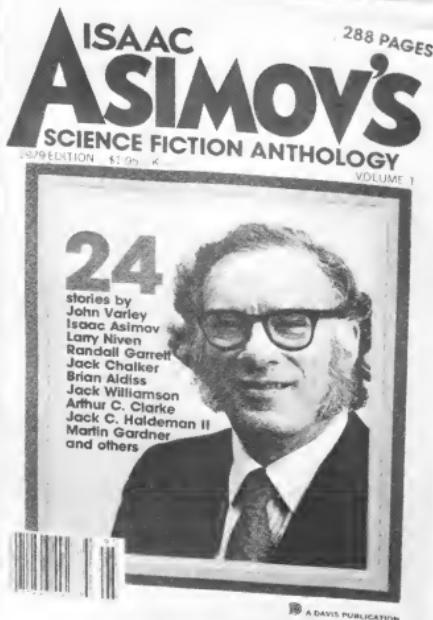
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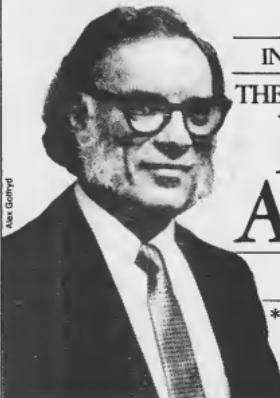
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In his 200th book*, Isaac Asimov reveals what makes a man write 200 books.

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resource and natural wonder" that is Isaac Asimov.

To further mark the occasion, Doubleday has begun reissuing his early, classic science fiction in uniform omnibus editions. THE FAR ENDS OF TIME AND EARTH contains the novels Pebble in the Sky and The End of Eternity, and the story collection, Earth Is Room Enough. The second volume, PRISONERS OF THE STARS, contains the novels The Stars, Like Dust and The Currents of Space, and the collection, The Martian Way and Other Stories. Eventually, Doubleday will republish all of Isaac Asimov's fiction.



**IN MEMORY YET GREEN
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
ISAAC ASIMOV
1920-1954**

*Actually, Isaac likes to keep his publishers happy, so he has written two "200th books." You'll also find Opus 200, published by Houghton Mifflin, at booksellers now.

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THE PRE-SCIENTIFIC UNIVERSE

I have often made the point that true science fiction is a creature of the last two centuries. Science fiction cannot exist as a picture of the future unless and until people get the idea that it is science and technology that produce the future, that it is advances in science and technology (or, at the very least, changes in them) that are bound to make the future different from the present and the past, and that thereby hangs a tale.

Naturally, no one could possibly get that idea until the rate of scientific and technological change became great enough to be noticed by people in the course of their lifetimes. That came about with the Industrial Revolution—say, by 1800—and it was only thereafter that science fiction could be written.

And yet there must have been something that came before science fiction, something that was not science fiction and yet filled the same emotional needs. There must have been tales of the strange and different, of life not as we know it, and of powers transcending our own.

Let's consider—

The respect that people have for science and for scientists (or the fear that people have, or a combination of both) rests on the certain belief that science is the key to the understanding of the Universe and that scientists can use science to manipulate that key. Through science people can make use of the laws of nature to control the environment and enhance human powers. By the steadily increasing understanding of the details of those laws, human powers will be greater in the future than in the past. If we can imagine the different ways

in which they will be greater, we can write our stories.

In previous centuries, however, most men had a dim understanding, if any at all, of such things as laws of nature: of rules that are unbreakable, of things-as-they-must-be that can swerve neither to help us nor to thwart us, and that must allow themselves to be ridden to glory, if we but knew how.

Instead, there was the notion that the Universe was the plaything of life and the will, that if there were events that seemed analogous to human deeds but that were far greater in magnitude, they were carried through by life-forms resembling those we know but greater in size and power.

The beings who controlled natural phenomena were therefore pictured in human form, but of superhuman strength, size, abilities, and length of life. Sometimes they were pictured as superanimal, or as super-combinations of animals. (The constant reference to the ordinary in the invention of the unusual is only to be expected, for imaginations are sharply limited, even among the best of us, and it is hard to think of anything really new or unusual—as Hollywood "sci-fi" constantly demonstrates.)

Since the phenomena of the Universe don't often make sense, the gods are usually pictured as whimsical and unpredictable, often little better than childish. Since natural events are often disastrous, the gods must be easily offended. Since natural events are often helpful, the gods are basically kindly, provided they are well-treated and their anger is not roused.

It is only too reasonable to suppose

that people would invent formulas for placating the gods and persuading them to do the right thing. Nor can the validity of these formulas be generally disproven by events. If the formulas don't work, then undoubtedly someone has done something to offend the gods. Those that had invented or utilized the formulas had no problems in finding guilty parties on whom to blame the failure of the formula in specific instances, so that faith in the formulas themselves never wavered. (We needn't sneer. By the same principle, we continue to have faith in economists, sociologists and meteorologists today, even though their statements seem to match reality only erratically at best.)

In pre-scientific times, then, it was the priest, magician, wizard, shaman (again the name doesn't matter) who filled the function of the scientist today. It was the priest, etc., who was perceived as having the secret of controlling the Universe, and it was advances in the knowledge of magical formulas that could enhance power.

The ancient myths and legends are full of stories of human beings with super-normal powers. There are the legendary heroes, for instance, who learn to control winged horses or flying carpets. Those ancient pieces of magic still fascinate us today; and I imagine a youngster would thrill to such mystical methods of aeronavagation and long for the chance to partake in it, even if he were reading the tales while on a jet plane.

Think of the crystal ball, into which one can gaze to see things that are happening many miles away, and magic shells that can allow us to hear the whispering of humans many

miles away—how much more wonderful than the television sets and the telephones today.

Consider the doors that open with "Open sesame" rather than by the click of a remote-control device. Consider the seven-league boots that can transport you across the countryside almost as quickly as an automobile can.

Or, for that matter, think of the monsters of legend, the powerful travesties of life invented by combining animal characteristics: the man-horse Centaur, the man-goat Satyr, the woman-lion Sphinx, the woman-hawk Harpy, the eagle-lion Gryphon, the snake-woman Gorgon, and so on. In science fiction we have extra-terrestrials that are often built up on the same principle.

The goals of these ancient stories are the same as those of modern science fiction—the depiction of life as we don't know it.

The emotional needs that are fulfilled are the same—the satisfaction of the longing for wonder.

The difference is that the ancient myths and legends fulfill those needs and meet those goals against the background of a Universe that is controlled by gods and demons, who

can in turn be controlled by magical formulas—either in the form of enchantments to coerce, or prayers to cajole. Science fiction, on the other hand, fulfills those needs against the background of a Universe that is controlled by impersonal and unswervable laws of nature which can in turn be controlled by an understanding of their nature.

In a narrow sense, only science fiction is valid for today, since, as far as we can tell, the Universe *does* follow the dictates of the laws of Nature and is *not* at the mercy of gods and demons.

Nevertheless, there are times when we shouldn't be too narrow or haughty in our definitions. It would be wrong to throw out a style of literature that has tickled the human fancy for thousands of years for the trivial reason that it is not in accord with reality. Reality isn't all there is, after all.

Shall we no longer thrill to the climactic duel of Achilles and Hector because people no longer fight with spears and shields? Shall we no longer feel the excitement of the naval battles of the War of 1812 and of the Napoleonic Wars because our warships are no longer made of wood

and are no longer equipped with sails?

Never!

Why, then, shouldn't people who enjoy an exciting science fiction adventure story not enjoy a rousing mythological fiction adventure story? The two are set in different kinds of Universes but follow analogous paths.

So though I am sufficiently stick-in-the-muddish to be narrow in my definition of science fiction and would not be willing to consider sword-and-sorcery as examples of science fiction, I am willing to consider it the *equivalent* of science fiction set in another kind of Universe—a pre-scientific Universe.

You may therefore occasionally expect to see in *Asfam*, stories in the tradition of Robert E. Howard and his Conan the Barbarian; of Fritz Leiber and his *Fafhrd* and the Grey Mouser; of J. R. R. Tolkien and his tales of Middle Earth.

We don't even ask that they be wrenching out of context and somehow be made to fit the Universe of reality by being given a scientific or pseudo-scientific gloss. We ask only that they be self-consistent in their pre-scientific Universe—and that they be well-written and exciting stories.

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TO THE EDITOR

Letters

GEORGE, Okay, okay. You guys have accomplished what no other magazine in any field has been able to do, and that is to prompt me to write a letter to the editor.

Big thrill, huh?

Why do I get the feeling that you guys tailored this magazine to me? I'm sorry, I meant "these magazines." I am so happy with what you've produced so far, I find myself hesitant to read more, fearing a letdown; but, lo and behold, each story and article is as good if not better than the last.

I have been a fan of the "Good Doctor's" for a long time, and I brag for him every time I see his name in college textbooks, emphatically pointing it out to my friends.

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The *Adventure* magazine was excellent. I hope it works out for you. I'm still in the process of reading the second issue, and enjoying every second. "Keepersmith" was well written, "Starc-school" was great, and I loved "How It Happened."

Oh, one more thing. I read Steve Duff's letter in the *Adventure* magazine. When I saw his address, it all became clear to me. Poor kid, he must be going slowly nuts over there. I know, 'cause I'm a Dam Neck alum.

Guy L. Pace
Box 962
Friday Harbor WA 98260

There's no need to put Good Doctor in quotes. It's my name.

—Isaac G. D. Asimov

DEAR ED., I picked up your Spring 1979 issue a few weeks back, and I have time to comment on it now. I find the issue to be quite good. I like being able to read a magazine without holding it in my hands, but just laying it flat and turning pages. When's the next issue coming out? [By now, it's out! GHS]

Dr. Asimov's editorial was excellent. He has that very rare ability to make what seems at first glance to be dull facts into a dramatic happening. It keeps me reading his articles for *F & SF*, many of his science books, and his articles here. And, of course, his science fiction.

I'll hold off on the Letters until the end. I prefer them at the end of the magazine, rather than up front.

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The limerick epic on Conan was interesting.

"Keepersmith" was enjoyable, but not as good as some stories I've seen from Randal Garrett.

"The Magician's Apprentice" was also good, being the second of that excellent Momus series.

The article/column on science fiction in Hollywood is interesting and gives me some idea of what to look for in theaters, plus an informative and fact-filled first section on the commercialization of *Star Wars*.

The latest Feghoot was about what I expected, a horrible pun. Sometimes I have to read it twice or three times before I get it. This was such a time.

Dr. Asimov's short story was a small bit of humorous nonsense, more entertainment.

The next three stories were unmemoable. I certainly couldn't remember them, except for the fact that Jack C. Haldeman II's story was one of his strange sports stories and set in a bar.

"Starschool" was good, and a good conclusion to the issue.

I'm not fond of putting the center-fold painting on the cover. I would prefer the centerfold and cover to be two different artworks, but you can't have everything. And putting photos on the back of the centerfold is a good idea.

The Lettercolumn is interesting. With letters much longer than those in your other magazine, I find them a much better read. William Tuning's letter was the best of the lot.

About your distribution: I finally found your second issue on November 30th, which, according to the date in your first issue, was two days late. I bought it the first place I saw it in, but I saw it in several others soon after. Though it does clearly have "Science Fiction" written all over it, it was shoved in with the large-sized comic books or (horror of horrors) lumped in with the UFOs and Ancient Astronauts group. This may or may not hurt your sales.

Here's hoping for a third issue! [Here it is! GHS]

Sincerely,

Robert Nowall
1714 SE 11th Av.
Cape Coral FL 33904

If you see more than one copy on the newsstand, the trick is to buy one and place the rest next to the National Geographics.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George:

By the way, I thoroughly enjoyed your new *Adventure* 'zine. In the second issue my favorite story was "Longshot," by Jack C. Haldeman II, closely followed by Dr. A.'s own "How It Happened." I do not mind the couple of errata that crept in unnoticed.

I do have a gripe, however. You have asked us to rate 'zine distribution in our area, and on that I must give you a "D-"; I have not seen *AsfAm* on any newsstand I frequent around D.C. My copy came by mail from a friend all the way in Massachusetts.

Get those magazines to our Peoples Drugstore chain, at least, because their absence is depriving our nation's capital of some fine reading material!

Best New Year wishes,

Else de Vera
6060 Duke St. #1506
Alexandria VA 22304

What errata? In my story?

—Isaac Asimov

This information on where we're not getting good circulation is of the greatest importance to us. Our Newsstand Circulation Director, Mr. Gabree, is trying to correct the problem you told us about here.

—George H. Scithers

Dear Dr. Asimov & Mr. Scithers:

Congratulations on a great magazine! I waited until I had the second issue before I wrote, to see if it would continue to be as fine as the first issue; and it definitely is. It's a shame that there are only four issues a year; I think it should be at least six (if not more).

The idea of the poster in the center is fantabulous! I have yet to see a copy at the magazine shop with it torn out, but maybe I've been lucky.

In this day of SF magazines that print a few letters in the back of their issue or don't print any at all it is a breath of fresh methane to see one that not only prints a sizable amount of fandom foolery, but also puts it in the FRONT of the magazine! Thanks, I

love it.

"Starschool" was the best story in the second issue, closely followed by "Keepersmith." The art for "Starschool" was well done; I wish I could say the same for "Keepersmith." I just don't think it was as good as it could have been. "The Magician's Apprentice" was in third place; Barry B. Longyear has created quite a fascinating world in Momus. Next, in order, are "Second Coming," "Longshot," and "The Casque of Lamont T. Yado." I think Dr. Asimov has uncovered the true secret of the Bible in "How It Happened."

Ferdinand Feghoot went a bit far. "Under the Rainbow" looks as if it will be an interesting column. "Conan the Limmerian" was a good sum-up of the life and times of Conan, but doesn't Mr. de Camp have anything better to write these days? Another good editorial by the Doctor to start my reading was appreciated.

Keep the adventure in science fiction!

Gus Gauba
Bisbee AZ

The secret is, I always enjoy letters and I have always had the mind of a fan.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

Yeah and a hooey hah-hah heep for *AsfAm*, the best thing to come along in recent year since *IA'sfm*. If there's one thing I love, it's a good, solid, rip-roaring yarn. Keep the spinners spinning!

Best,
Tat Markham
2919 NE 13th Dr.
Gainesville FL 32601

If there's one thing we all love, that's it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs,

I really enjoyed the first issue of *AsfAM*, and just had to write you. You have a devout reader in me, and I'll cry if you fold.

Yours devoutly,
Matt Costello
54 Middle St.
Hallowell ME 04347

We'll cry too.

—Isaac Asimov



The Last Defender Of Camelot

By Roger Zelazny

Illustrated by Frank Borth



The three muggers who stopped him that October night in San Francisco did not anticipate much resistance from the old man, despite his size. He was well-dressed, and that was sufficient.

The first approached him with his hand extended. The other two hung back a few paces.

"Just give me your wallet and your watch," the mugger said. "You'll save yourself a lot of trouble."

The old man's grip shifted on his walking stick. His shoulders straightened. His shock of white hair tossed as he turned his head to regard the other.

"Why don't you come and take them?"

The mugger began another step but he never completed it. The stick was almost invisible in the speed of its swinging. It struck him on the left temple and he fell.

Without pausing, the old man caught the stick by its middle with his left hand, advanced and drove it into the belly of the next nearest man. Then, with an upward hook as the man doubled, he caught him in the softness beneath the jaw, behind the chin, with its point. As the man fell, he clubbed him with its butt on the back of the neck.

The third man had reached out and caught the old man's upper arm by then. Dropping the stick, the old man seized the mugger's shirtfront with his left hand, his belt with his right, raised him from the ground until he held him at arm's length above his head and slammed him against the side of the building to his right, releasing him as he did so.

He adjusted his apparel, ran a hand through his hair and retrieved his walking stick. For a moment he regarded the three fallen forms, then shrugged and continued on his way.

There were sounds of traffic from somewhere off to his left. He turned right at the next corner. The moon appeared above tall buildings as he walked. The smell of the ocean was on the air. It had rained earlier, and the pavement still shone beneath streetlamps. He moved slowly, pausing occ-

casionally to examine the contents of darkened shop windows.

After perhaps ten minutes, he came upon a side street showing more activity than any of the others he had passed. There was a drugstore, still open, on the corner, a diner farther up the block, and several well-lighted storefronts. A number of people were walking along the far side of the street. A boy coasted by on a bicycle. He turned there, his pale eyes regarding everything he passed.

Halfway up the block, he came to a dirty window on which was painted the word READINGS. Beneath it were displayed the outline of a hand and a scattering of playing cards. As he passed the open door, he glanced inside. A brightly garbed woman, her hair bound back in a green kerchief, sat smoking at the rear of the room. She smiled as their eyes met and crooked an index finger toward herself. He smiled back and turned away, but . . .

He looked at her again. What was it? He glanced at his watch.

Turning, he entered the shop and moved to stand before her. She rose. She was small, barely over five feet in height.

"Your eyes," he remarked, "are green. Most gypsies I know have dark eyes."

She shrugged.

"You take what you get in life. Have you a problem?"

"Give me a moment and I'll think of one," he said. "I just came in here because you remind me of someone and it bothers me—I can't think who."

"Come into the back," she said, "and sit down. We'll talk."

He nodded and followed her into a small room to the rear. A threadbare oriental rug covered the floor near the small table at which they seated themselves. Zodiacal prints and faded psychedelic posters of a semi-religious nature covered the walls. A crystal ball stood on a small stand in the far corner beside a vase of cut flowers. A dark, long-haired cat slept on a sofa to the right of it. A door to another room stood slightly ajar beyond the sofa. The only illumination came from a cheap lamp on the table before him and from a small candle in a plaster base atop the shawl-covered coffee table.

He leaned forward and studied her face, then shook his head and leaned back.

She flicked an ash onto the floor.

"Your problem?" she suggested.

He sighed.

"Oh, I don't really have a problem anyone can help me with. Look, I think I made a mistake coming in here. I'll pay you for your trouble, though, just as if you'd given me a reading. How much is it?"

He began to reach for his wallet, but she raised her hand.

"Is it that you do not believe in such things?" she asked, her eyes scrutinizing his face.

"No, quite the contrary," he replied. "I am willing to



believe in magic, divination, and all manner of spells and sendings, angelic and demonic. But—"

"But not from someone in a dump like this?"

He smiled.

"No offense," he said.

A whistling sound filled the air. It seemed to come from the next room back.

"That's all right," she said, "but my water is boiling. I'd forgotten it was on. Have some tea with me? I do wash the cups. No charge. Things are slow."

"All right."

She rose and departed.

He glanced at the door to the front but eased himself back into his chair, resting his large, blue-veined hands on its padded arms. He sniffed then, nostrils flaring, and cocked his head as at some half-familiar aroma.

After a time, she returned with a tray, set it on the coffee table. The cat stirred, raised her head, blinked at it, stretched, closed her eyes again.

"Cream and sugar?"

"Please. One lump."

She placed two cups on the table before him.

"Take either one," she said.

He smiled and drew the one on his left toward him. She placed an ashtray in the middle of the table and returned to her own seat, moving the other cup to her place.

"That wasn't necessary," he said, placing his hands on the table.

She shrugged.

"You don't know me. Why should you trust me? Probably got a lot of money on you."

He looked at her face again. She had apparently removed some of the heavier makeup while in the back room. The jawline, the brow . . . He looked away. He took a sip of tea.

"Good tea. Not instant," he said. "Thanks."

"So you believe in all sorts of magic," she asked, sipping her own.

"Some," he said.

"Any special reason why?"

"Some of it works."

"For example?"

He gestured aimlessly with his left hand.

"I've traveled a lot. I've seen some strange things..."

"And you have no problems?"

He chuckled.

"Still determined to give me a reading? All right. I'll tell you a little about myself and what I want right now, and you can tell me whether I'll get it. Okay?"

"I'm listening."

"I am a buyer for a large gallery in the East. I am something of an authority on ancient work in precious metals. I am in town to attend an auction of such items from the estate of a private collector. I will go to inspect the pieces tomorrow. Naturally, I hope to find something good. What do you think my chances are?"

"Give me your hands."

He extended them, palms upward. She leaned forward and regarded them. She looked back up at him immediately.

"Your wrists have more rascettes than I can count!"

"Yours seem to have quite a few, also."

She met his eyes for only a moment and returned her attention to his hands. He noted that she had paled beneath what remained of her makeup, and her breathing was now irregular.

"No," she finally said, drawing back, "you are not going to find here what you are looking for."

Her hand trembled slightly as she raised her teacup. He frowned.

"I asked only in jest," he said. "Nothing to get upset about. I doubted I would find what I am really looking for, anyway."

She shook her head.

"Tell me your name."

"I've lost my accent," he said, "but I'm French. The name is DuLac."

She stared into his eyes and began to blink rapidly.

"No . . ." she said. "No."

"I'm afraid so. What's yours?"

"Madam LeFay," she said. "I just repainted that sign. It's still drying."

He began to laugh, but it froze in his throat.

"Now—I know—who—you remind me of. . . ."

"You reminded me of someone, also. Now I, too, know."

Her eyes brimmed, her mascara ran.

"It couldn't be," he said. "Not here. . . . Not in a place like this. . . ."

"You dear man," she said softly, and she raised his right hand to her lips. She seemed to choke for a moment, then said, "I had thought that I was the last, and yourself buried at Joyous Gard. I never dreamed . . ." Then, "This?" gesturing about the room. "Only because it amuses me, helps to pass the time. The waiting—"

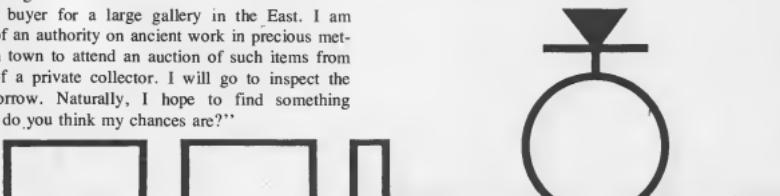
She stopped. She lowered his hand.

"Tell me about it," she said.

"The waiting?" he said. "For what do you wait?"

"Peace," she said. "I am here by the power of my arts, through all the long years. But you—How did you manage it?"

"—" He took another drink of tea. He looked about the room. "I do not know how to begin," he said. "I



survived the final battles, saw the kingdom sundered, could do nothing—and at last departed England. I wandered, taking service at many courts, and after a time under many names, as I saw that I was not aging—or aging very, very slowly. I was in India, China—I fought in the Crusades. I've been everywhere. I've spoken with magicians and mystics—most of them charlatans, a few with the power, none so great as Merlin—and what had come to be my own belief was confirmed by one of them, a man more than half charlatan, yet . . . " He paused and finished his tea. "Are you certain you want to hear all this?" he asked.

"I want to hear it. Let me bring more tea first, though."

She returned with the tea. She lit a cigarette and leaned back.

"Go on."

"I decided that it was—my sin," he said, "with . . . the Queen."

"I don't understand."

"I betrayed my Liege, who was also my friend, in the one thing which must have hurt him most. The love I felt was stronger than loyalty or friendship—and even today, to this day, it still is. I cannot repent, and so I cannot be forgiven. Those were strange and magical times. We lived in a land destined to become myth. Powers walked the realm in those days, forces which are now gone from the earth. How or why, I cannot say. But you know that it is true. I am somehow of a piece with those gone things, and the laws that rule my existence are not normal laws of the natural world. I believe that I cannot die; that it has fallen my lot, as punishment, to wander the world till I have completed the Quest. I believe I will only know rest the day I find the Holy Grail. Giuseppe Balsamo, before he became known as Cagliostro, somehow saw this and said it to me just as I had thought it, though I never said a word of it to him. And so I have traveled the world, searching. I go no more as knight, or soldier, but as an appraiser. I have been in nearly every museum on Earth, viewed all the great private collections. So far, it has eluded me."

"You are getting a little old for battle."

He snorted.

"I have never lost," he stated flatly. "Down ten centuries, I have never lost a personal contest. It is true that I have aged, yet whenever I am threatened all of my former strength returns to me. But, look where I may, fight where I may, it has never served me to discover that which I must find. I feel I am unforgiven and must wander like the Eternal Jew until the end of the world."

She lowered her head.

". . . And you say I will not find it tomorrow?"

"You will never find it," she said softly.

"You saw that in my hand?"

She shook her head.

"Your story is fascinating and your theory novel," she began, "but Cagliostro was a total charlatan. Something must have betrayed your thoughts, and he made a shrewd guess. But he was wrong. I say that you will never find it, not because you are unworthy or unforgiven. No, never that. A more loyal subject than yourself never drew breath. Don't you know that Arthur forgave you? It was an arranged marriage. The same thing happened constantly elsewhere, as you must know. You gave her something he could not. There was only tenderness there. He understood. The only forgiveness you require is that which has been withheld all these long years—your own. No, it is not a doom that has been laid upon you. It is your own feelings which led you to assume an impossible quest, something tantamount to total unforgiveness. But you have suffered all these centuries upon the wrong trail."

When she raised her eyes, she saw that his were hard, like ice or gemstones. But she met his gaze and continued: "There is not now, was not then, and probably never was, a Holy Grail."

"I saw it," he said, "that day it passed through the Hall of the Table. We all saw it."

"You thought you saw it," she corrected him. "I hate to shatter an illusion that has withstood all the other tests of time, but I fear I must. The kingdom, as you recall, was at that time in turmoil. The knights were growing restless and falling away from the fellowship. A year—six months, even—and all would have collapsed, all Arthur had striven so hard to put together. He knew that the longer Camelot stood, the longer its name would endure, the stronger its ideals would become. So he made a decision, a purely political one. Something was needed to hold things together. He called upon Merlin, already half-mad, yet still shrewd enough to see what was needed and able to provide it. The Quest was born. Merlin's powers created the illusion you saw that day. It was a lie, yes. A glorious lie, though. And it served for years after to bind you all in brotherhood, in the name of justice and love. It entered literature, it promoted nobility and the higher ends of culture. It served its purpose. But it was—never—really—there. You have been chasing a ghost. I am sorry Launcelot, but I have absolutely no reason to lie to you. I know magic when I see it. I saw it then. That is how it happened."

For a long while he was silent. Then he laughed.

"You have an answer for everything," he said. "I could almost believe you, if you could but answer me one thing more—Why am I here? For what reason? By what power? How is it I have been preserved for half the Christian era while other men grow old and die in a handful of years? Can you tell me now what Cagliostro could not?"

"Yes," she said, "I believe that I can."

He rose to his feet and began to pace. The cat, alarmed, sprang from the sofa and ran into the back room. He stooped and snatched up his walking stick. He started for the door.

"I suppose it was worth waiting a thousand years to see you afraid," she said.

He halted.

"That is unfair," he replied.

"I know. But now you will come back and sit down," she said.

He was smiling once more as he turned and returned.

"Tell me," he said. "How do you see it?"

"Yours was the last enchantment of Merlin, that is how I see it."

"Merlin? Me? Why?"

"Gossip had it the old goat took Nimue into the woods and she had to use one of his own spells on him in self-defense—spell which caused him to sleep forever in some lost place. If it was the spell that I believe it was, then at least part of the rumor was incorrect. There was no known counterspell, but the effects of the enchantment would have caused him to sleep not forever but for a millennium, and then to awaken. My guess now is that his last conscious act before he dropped off was to lay this enchantment upon you, so that you would be on hand when he returned."

"I suppose it might be possible, but why would he want me or need me?"

"If I were journeying into a strange time, I would want an ally once I reached it. And if I had a choice, I would want it to be the greatest champion of the day."

"Merlin . . ." he mused. "I suppose that it could be as you say. Excuse me, but a long life has just been shaken up, from beginning to end. If this is true . . ."

"I am sure that it is."

"If this is true . . . A millennium, you say?"

"Just so."

"Well, it is almost exactly a thousand years now."

"I know. I do not believe that our meeting tonight was a matter of chance. You are destined to meet him upon his awakening, which should be soon. Something has ordained that you meet me first, however, to be warned."

"Warned? Warned of what?"

"He is mad, Launcelot. Many of us felt a great relief at his passing. If the realm had not been sundered finally by strife it would probably have been broken by his hand, anyway."

"That I find difficult to believe. He was always a strange man—for who can fully understand a sorceror?—and in his later years he did seem at least partly daft. But he never struck me as evil."

"Nor was he. His was the most dangerous morality of all. He was a misguided idealist. In a more primitive time and place and with a willing tool like Arthur, he was able to create a legend. Today, in an age of monstrous



weapons, with the right leader as his cat's paw, he could unleash something totally devastating. He would see a wrong and force his man to try righting it. He would do it in the name of the same high ideals he always served, but he would not appreciate the results until it was too late. How could he—even if he were sane? He has no conception of modern international relations."

"What is to be done? What is my part in all of this?"

"I believe you should go back, to England, to be present at his awakening, to find out exactly what he wants, to try to reason with him."

"I don't know . . . How would I find him?"

"You found me. When the time is right, you will be in the proper place. I am certain of that. It was meant to be, probably even a part of his spell. Seek him. But do not trust him."

"I don't know, Morgana." He looked at the wall, unseeing. "I don't know."

"You have waited this long and you draw back now from finally finding out?"

"You are right—in that much, at least." He folded his hands, raised them and rested his chin upon them. "What I would do if he really returned, I do not know. Try to reason with him, yes—Have you any other advice?"



"Just that you be there."

"You've looked at my hand. You have the power. What did you see?"

She turned away.

"It is uncertain," she said.

That night he dreamed, as he sometimes did, of times long gone. They sat about the great Table, as they had on that day. Gawaine was there, and Percival. Galahad . . . He winced. This day was different from other days. There was a certain tension in the air, a before-the-storm feeling, an electrical thing. . . . Merlin stood at the far end of the room, hands in the sleeves of his long robe, hair and beard snowy and unkempt, pale eyes staring—at what, none could be certain. . . .

After some timeless time, a reddish glow appeared near the door. All eyes moved toward it. It grew brighter and advanced slowly into the room—a formless apparition of light. There were sweet odors and some few soft strains of music. Gradually, a form began to take shape at its center, resolving itself into the likeness of a chalice. . . .

He felt himself rising, moving slowly, following it in its course through the great chamber, advancing upon it, soundlessly and deliberately, as if moving underwater. . . .

. . . Reaching for it.

His hand entered the circle of light, moved toward its center, neared the now blazing cup and passed through. . . .

Immediately, the light faded. The outline of the chalice wavered, and it collapsed in upon itself, fading, fading, gone. . . .

There came a sound, rolling, echoing about the hall. Laughter.

He turned and regarded the others. They sat about the table, watching him, laughing. Even Merlin managed a dry chuckle.

Suddenly, his great blade was in his hand, and he raised it as he strode toward the Table. The knights nearest him drew back as he brought the weapon crashing down.

The Table split in half and fell. The room shook.

The quaking continued. Stones were dislodged from the walls. A roof beam fell. He raised his arm.

The entire castle began to come apart, falling about him, and still the laughter continued.

He awoke damp with perspiration and lay still for a long while. In the morning, he bought a ticket for London.

Two of the three elemental sounds of the world were suddenly with him as he walked that evening, stick in



hand. For a dozen days, he had hiked about Cornwall, finding no clues to that which he sought. He had allowed himself two more before giving up and departing.

Now the wind and the rain were upon him, and he increased his pace. The fresh-lit stars were smothered by a mass of cloud and wisps of fog grew like ghostly fungi on either hand. He moved among trees, paused, continued on.

"Shouldn't have stayed out this late," he muttered, and after several more pauses, "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrova per una selva oscura, che la diritta via era smarrita,*" then he chuckled, halting beneath a tree.

The rain was not heavy. It was more a fine mist now. A bright patch in the lower heavens showed where the moon hung veiled.

He wiped his face, turned up his collar. He studied the position of the moon. After a time, he struck off to his right. There was a faint rumble of thunder in the distance.

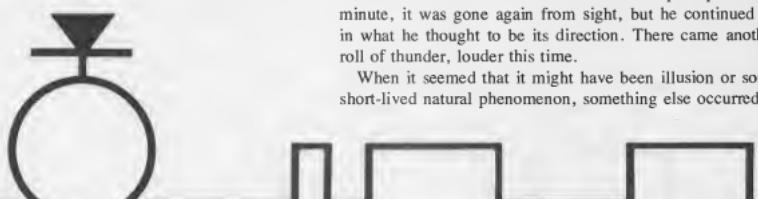
The fog continued to grow about him as he went. Soggy leaves made squishing noises beneath his boots. An animal of indeterminate size bolted from a clump of shrubbery beside a cluster of rocks and tore off through the darkness.

Five minutes . . . ten . . . He cursed softly. The rainfall had increased in intensity. Was that the same rock?

He turned in a complete circle. All directions were equally uninviting. Selecting one at random, he commenced walking once again.

Then, in the distance, he discerned a spark, a glow, a wavering light. It vanished and reappeared periodically, as though partly blocked, the line of sight a function of his movements. He headed toward it. After perhaps half a minute, it was gone again from sight, but he continued on in what he thought to be its direction. There came another roll of thunder, louder this time.

When it seemed that it might have been illusion or some short-lived natural phenomenon, something else occurred in



that same direction. There was a movement, a shadow-within-shadow shuffling at the foot of a great tree. He slowed his pace, approaching the spot cautiously.

There!

A figure detached itself from a pool of darkness ahead and to the left. Manlike, it moved with a slow and heavy tread, creaking sounds emerging from the forest floor beneath it. A vagrant moonbeam touched it for a moment, and it appeared yellow and metallically slick beneath moisture.

He halted. It seemed that he had just regarded a knight in full armor in his path. How long since he had beheld such a sight? He shook his head and stared.

The figure had also halted. It raised its right arm in a beckoning gesture, then turned and began to walk away. He hesitated for only a moment, then followed.

It turned off to the left and pursued a treacherous path, rocky, slippery, heading slightly downward. He actually used his stick now, to assure his footing, as he tracked its deliberate progress. He gained on it, to the point where he could clearly hear the metallic scraping sounds of its passage.

Then it was gone, swallowed by a greater darkness.

He advanced to the place where he had last beheld it. He stood in the lee of a great mass of stone. He reached out and probed it with his stick.

He tapped steadily along its nearest surface, and then the stick moved past it. He followed.

There was an opening, a crevice. He had to turn sidewise to pass within it, but as he did the full glow of the light he had seen came into sight for several seconds.

The passage curved and widened, leading him back and down. Several times, he paused and listened, but there were no sounds other than his own breathing.

He withdrew his handkerchief and dried his face and hands carefully. He brushed moisture from his coat, turned down his collar. He scuffed the mud and leaves from his boots. He adjusted his apparel. Then he strode forward, rounding a final corner, into a chamber lit by a small oil lamp suspended by three delicate chains from some point in the darkness overhead. The yellow knight stood unmoving beside the far wall. On a fiber mat atop a stony pedestal directly beneath the lamp lay an old man in tattered garments. His bearded face was half-masked by shadows.

He moved to the old man's side. He saw then that those ancient dark eyes were open.

"Merlin . . . ?" he whispered.

There came a faint hissing sound, a soft croak. Realizing the source, he leaned nearer.

"Elixir . . . in earthen crock . . . on ledge . . . in back," came the gravelly whisper.

He turned and sought the ledge, the container.

"Do you know where it is?" he asked the yellow figure. It neither stirred nor replied, but stood like a display

piece. He turned away from it then and sought further. After a time, he located it. It was more a niche than a ledge, blending in with the wall, cloaked with shadow. He ran his fingertips over the container's contours, raised it gently. Something liquid stirred within it. He wiped its lip on his sleeve after he had returned to the lighted area. The wind whistled past the entranceway and he thought he felt the faint vibration of thunder.

Sliding one hand beneath his shoulders, he raised the ancient form. Merlin's eyes still seemed unfocussed. He moistened Merlin's lips with the liquid. The old man licked them, and after several moments opened his mouth. He administered a sip, then another, and another . . .

Merlin signalled for him to lower him, and he did. He glanced again at the yellow armor, but it had remained motionless the entire while. He looked back at the sorceror and saw that a new light had come into his eyes and he was studying him, smiling faintly.

"Feel better?"

Merlin nodded. A minute passed, and a touch of color appeared upon his cheeks. He elbowed himself into a sitting position and took the container into his hands. He raised it and drank deeply.

He sat still for several minutes after that. His thin hands, which had appeared waxy in the flamelight, grew darker, fuller. His shoulders straightened. He placed the crock on the bed beside him and stretched his arms. His joints creaked the first time he did it, but not the second. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and rose slowly to his feet. He was a full head shorter than Launcelot.

"It is done," he said, staring back into the shadows.

"Much has happened, of course . . . ?"

"Much has happened," Launcelot replied.

"You have lived through it all. Tell me, is the world a better place or is it worse than it was in those days?"

"Better in some ways, worse in others. It is different."

"How is it better?"

"There are many ways of making life easier, and the sum total of human knowledge has increased vastly."

"How has it worsened?"

"There are many more people in the world. Consequently, there are many more people suffering from poverty, disease, ignorance. The world itself has suffered great depredation, in the way of pollution and other assaults on the integrity of nature."

"Wars?"

"There is always someone fighting, somewhere."

"They need help."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Merlin turned and looked into his eyes.



"What do you mean?"

"People haven't changed. They are as rational—and irrational—as they were in the old days. They are as moral and law-abiding—and not—as ever. Many new things have been learned, many new situations evolved, but I do not believe that the nature of man has altered significantly in the time you've slept. Nothing you do is going to change that. You may be able to alter a few features of the times, but would it really be proper to meddle? Everything is so interdependent today that even you would not be able to predict all the consequences of any actions you take. You might do more harm than good; and whatever you do, man's nature will remain the same."

"This isn't like you, Lance. You were never much given to philosophizing in the old days."

"I've had a long time to think about it."

"And I've had a long time to dream about it. War is your craft, Lance. Stay with that."

"I gave it up a long time ago."

"Then what are you now?"

"An appraiser."

Merlin turned away, took another drink. He seemed to radiate a fierce-energy when he turned again.

"And your oath? To right wrongs, to punish the wicked . . . ?"

"The longer I lived the more difficult it became to determine what was a wrong and who was wicked. Make it clear to me again and I may go back into business."

"Galahad would never have addressed me so."

"Galahad was young, naïve, trusting. Speak not to me of my son."

"Launcelot! Launcelot!" He placed a hand on his arm. "Why all this bitterness for an old friend who has done nothing for a thousand years?"

"I wished to make my position clear immediately. I feared you might contemplate some irreversible action which could alter the world balance of power fatally. I want you to know that I will not be party to it."

"Admit that you do not know what I might do, what I can do."

"Freely. That is why I fear you. What *do* you intend to do?"

"Nothing, at first. I wish merely to look about me, to see for myself some of these changes of which you have spoken. Then I will consider which wrongs need righting, who needs punishment, and who to choose as my champions. I will show you these things, and then you can go back into business, as you say."

Launcelot sighed.

"The burden of proof is on the moralist. Your judgment is no longer sufficient for me."

"Dear me," the other replied, "it is sad to have waited this long for an encounter of this sort, to find you have lost your faith in me. My powers are beginning to return already, Lance. Do you not feel magic in the air?"

"I feel something I have not felt in a long while."

"The sleep of ages was a restorative—an aid, actually. In a while, Lance, I am going to be stronger than I ever was before. And you doubt that I will be able to turn back the clock?"

"I doubt you can do it in a fashion to benefit anybody. Look, Merlin, I'm sorry. I do not like it that things have come to this either. But I have lived too long, seen too much, known too much of how the world works now to trust any one man's opinion concerning its salvation. Let it go. You are a mysterious, revered legend. I do not know what you really are. But forgo exercising your powers in any sort of crusade. Do something else this time around. Become a physician and fight pain. Take up painting. Be a professor of history, an antiquarian. Hell, be a social critic and point out what evils you see for people to correct themselves."

"Do you really believe I could be satisfied with any of those things?"

"Men find satisfaction in many things. It depends on the man, not on the things. I'm just saying that you should avoid using your powers in any attempt to effect social changes as we once did, by violence."

"Whatever changes have been wrought, time's greatest irony lies in its having transformed you into a pacifist."

"You are wrong."

"Admit it! You have finally come to fear the clash of arms! An appraiser! What kind of knight are you?"

"One who finds himself in the wrong time and the wrong place, Merlin."

The sorcerer shrugged and turned away.

"Let it be, then. It is good that you have chosen to tell me all these things immediately. Thank you for that, anyway. A moment."

Merlin walked to the rear of the cave, returned in moments attired in fresh garments. The effect was startling. His entire appearance was more kempt and cleanly. His hair and beard now appeared gray rather than white. His step was sure and steady. He held a staff in his right hand but did not lean upon it.

"Come walk with me," he said.

"It is a bad night."

"It is not the same night you left without. It is not even the same place."

As he passed the suit of yellow armor, he snapped his fingers near its visor. With a single creak, the figure moved and turned to follow him.

"Who is that?"

Merlin smiled.

"No one," he replied, and he reached back and raised the visor. The helmet was empty. "It is enchanted, animated by a spirit," he said. "A trifle clumsy, though, which is why I did not trust it to administer my draught. A perfect servant, however, unlike some. Incredibly strong and swift. Even in your prime you could not have beaten it. I fear nothing when it walks with me. Come, there is something I would have you see."

"Very well."

Launcelot followed Merlin and the hollow knight from the cave. The rain had stopped, and it was very still. They stood on an incredibly moonlit plain where mists drifted and grasses sparkled. Shadowy shapes stood in the distance.

"Excuse me," Launcelot said. "I left my walking stick inside."

He turned and re-entered the cave.

"Yes, fetch it, old man," Merlin replied. "Your strength is already on the wane."

When Launcelot returned, he leaned upon the stick and squinted across the plain.

"This way," Merlin said, "to where your questions will be answered. I will try not to move too quickly and tire you."

"Tire me?"

The sorcerer chuckled and began walking across the plain. Launcelot followed.

"Do you not feel a trifle weary?" he asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Do you know what is the matter with me?"

"Of course. I have withdrawn the enchantment which has protected you all these years. What you feel now are the first tentative touches of your true age. It will take some time to catch up with you, against your body's natural resistance, but it is beginning its advance."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Because I believed you when you said you were not a pacifist. And you spoke with sufficient vehemence for me to realize that you might even oppose me. I could not permit that, for I knew that your old strength was still there for you to call upon. Even a sorcerer might fear that, so I did what had to be done. By my power was it maintained; without it, it now drains away. It would have been good for us to work together once again, but I saw that that could not be."

Launcelot stumbled, caught himself, limped on. The hollow knight walked at Merlin's right hand.

"You say that your ends are noble," Launcelot said, "but I do not believe you. Perhaps in the old days they were. But more than the times have changed. You are different. Do you not feel it yourself?"

Merlin drew a deep breath and exhaled vapor.

"Perhaps it is my heritage," he said. Then, "I jest. Of course, I have changed. Everyone does. You yourself are a perfect example. What you consider a turn for the worse in

me is but the tip of an irreducible conflict which has grown up between us in the course of our changes. I still hold with the true ideals of Camelot."

Launcelot's shoulders were bent forward now and his breathing had deepened. The shapes loomed larger before them.

"Why, I know this place," he gasped. "Yet, I do not know it. Stonehenge does not stand so today. Even in Arthur's time it lacked this perfection. How did we get here? What has happened?"

He paused to rest, and Merlin halted to accommodate him.

"This night we have walked between the worlds," the sorcerer said. "This is a piece of the land of Faerie and that is the true Stonehenge, a holy place. I have stretched the bounds of the worlds to bring it here. Were I unkind I could send you back with it and strand you there forever. But it is better that you know a sort of peace. Come!"

Launcelot staggered along behind him, heading for the great circle of stones. The faintest of breezes came out of the west, stirring the mists.

"What do you mean—know a sort of peace?"

"The complete restoration of my powers and their increase will require a sacrifice in this place."

"Then you planned this for me all along!"

"No. It was not to have been you, Lance. Anyone would have served, though you will serve superbly well. It need not have been so, had you elected to assist me. You could still change your mind."

"Would you want someone who did that at your side?"

"You have a point there."

"Then why ask—save as a petty cruelty?"

"It is just that, for you have annoyed me."

Launcelot halted again when they came to the circle's periphery. He regarded the massive stands of stone.

"If you will not enter willingly," Merlin stated, "my servant will be happy to assist you."

Launcelot spat, straightened a little and glared.





"Think you I fear an empty suit of armor, juggled by some Hell-born wight? Even now, Merlin, without the benefit of wizardly succor, I could take that thing apart."

The sorcerer laughed.

"It is good that you at least recall the boasts of knighthood when all else has left you. I've half a mind to give you the opportunity, for the manner of your passing here is not important. Only the preliminaries are essential."

"But you're afraid to risk your servant?"

"Think you so, old man? I doubt you could even bear the weight of a suit of armor, let alone lift a lance. But if you are willing to try, so be it!"

He rapped the butt of his staff three times upon the ground.

"Enter," he said then. "You will find all that you need within. And I am glad you have made this choice. You were insufferable, you know. Just once, I longed to see you beaten, knocked down to the level of lesser mortals. I only wish the Queen could be here, to witness her champion's final engagement."

"So do I," said Launcelot, and he walked past the monolith and entered the circle.

A black stallion waited, its reins held down beneath a rock. Pieces of armor, a lance, a blade and a shield leaned against the side of the dolmen. Across the circle's diameter, a white stallion awaited the advance of the hollow knight.

"I am sorry I could not arrange for a page or a squire to assist you," Merlin said, coming around the other side of the monolith. "I'll be glad to help you myself, though."

"I can manage," Launcelot replied.

"My champion is accoutered in exactly the same fashion," Merlin said, "and I have not given him any edge over you in weapons."

"I never liked your puns either."

Launcelot made friends with the horse, then removed a small strand of red from his wallet and tied it about the butt of the lance. He leaned his stick against the dolmen stone and began to don the armor. Merlin, whose hair and beard were now almost black, moved off several paces and began drawing a diagram in the dirt with the end of his staff.

"You used to favor a white charger," he commented, "but I thought it appropriate to equip you with one of another color, since you have abandoned the ideals of the Table Round, betraying the memory of Camelot."

"On the contrary," Launcelot replied, glancing overhead at the passage of a sudden roll of thunder. "Any horse in a storm, and I am Camelot's last defender."

Merlin continued to elaborate upon the pattern he was drawing as Launcelot slowly equipped himself. The small wind continued to blow, stirring the mists. There came a flash of lightning, startling the horse. Launcelot calmed it.

Merlin stared at him for a moment and rubbed his eyes. Launcelot donned his helmet.

"For a moment," Merlin said, "you looked somehow different. . . ."

"Really? Magical withdrawal, do you think?" he asked, and he kicked the stone from the reins and mounted the stallion.

Merlin stepped back from the now completed diagram, shaking his head, as the mounted man leaned over and grasped the lance.

"You still seem to move with some strength," he said.

"Really?"

Launcelot raised the lance and couched it. Before taking up the shield he had hung at the saddle's side, he opened his visor and turned and regarded Merlin.

"Your champion appears to be ready," he said. "So am I."

Seen in another flash of light, it was an unlined face that looked down at Merlin, clear-eyed, wisps of pale gold hair fringing the forehead.

"What magic have the years taught you?" Merlin asked.

"Not magic," Launcelot replied. "Caution. I anticipated you. So, when I returned to the cave for my stick, I drank the rest of your elixir."

He lowered the visor and turned away.

"You walked like an old man"

"I'd a lot of practice. Signal your champion!"

Merlin laughed.

"Good! It is better this way," he decided, "to see you go down in full strength! You still cannot hope to win against a spirit!"

Launcelot raised the shield and leaned forward.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"Nothing!" Merlin said. Then he shouted, "Kill him, Raxas!"

A light rain began as they pounded across the field; and, staring ahead, Launcelot realized that flames were flickering behind his opponent's visor. At the last possible moment, he shifted the point of his lance into line with the hollow knight's blazing helm. There came more lightning and thunder.

His shield deflected the other's lance while his went on to strike the approaching head. It flew from the hollow knight's shoulders and bounced, smouldering, on the ground.

He continued on to the other end of the field and turned. When he had, he saw that the hollow knight, now headless, was doing the same. And beyond him, he saw two standing figures, where moments before there had been but one.

Morgana le Fay, clad in a white robe, red hair unbound and blowing in the wind, faced Merlin from across his pattern. It seemed they were speaking, but he could not hear the words. Then she began to raise her hands, and they glowed like cold fire. Merlin's staff was also gleaming, and he shifted it before him. Then he saw no more, for the hollow knight was ready for the second charge.

He couched his lance, raised the shield, leaned forward and gave his mount the signal. His arm felt like a bar of iron, his strength like an endless current of electricity as he raced down the field. The rain was falling more heavily now and the lightning began a constant flickering. A steady rolling of thunder smothered the sound of the hoofbeats, and the wind whistled past his helm as he approached the other warrior, his lance centered on his shield.

They came together with an enormous crash. Both knights reeled and the hollow one fell, his shield and breastplate pierced by a broken lance. His left arm came away as he struck the earth; the lancepoint snapped and the shield fell beside him. But he began to rise almost immediately, his right hand drawing his long sword.

Launcelot dismounted, discarding his shield, drawing his own great blade. He moved to meet his headless foe. The other struck first and he parried it, a mighty shock running down his arms. He swung a blow of his own. It was parried.

They staggered swords across the field, till finally Launcelot saw his opening and landed his heaviest blow. The hollow knight toppled into the mud, his breastplate cloven almost to the point where the spear's shaft protruded. At that moment, Morgana le Fay screamed.

Launcelot turned and saw that she had fallen across the pattern Merlin had drawn. The sorceror, now bathed in a bluish light, raised his staff and moved forward. Launcelot took a step toward them and felt a great pain in his left side.

Even as he turned toward the half-risen hollow knight who was drawing his blade back for another blow, Launcelot reversed his double-handed grip upon his own weapon and raised it high, point downward.

He hurled himself upon the other, and his blade pierced the cuirass entirely as he bore him back down, nailing him to the earth. A shriek arose from beneath him, echoing within the armor, and a gout of fire emerged from the neck hole, sped upward and away, dwindled in the rain, flickered out moments later.

Launcelot pushed himself into a kneeling position. Slowly then, he rose to his feet and turned toward the two figures who again faced one another. Both were now standing within the muddled geometries of power, both were now bathed in the bluish light. Launcelot took a step toward them, then another.

"Merlin!" he called out, continuing to advance upon them. "I've done what I said I would! Now I'm coming to kill you!"



Morgana le Fay turned toward him, eyes wide.

"No!" she cried. "Depart the circle! Hurry! I am holding him here! His power wanes! In moments, this place will be no more! Go!"

Launcelot hesitated but a moment, then turned and walked as rapidly as he was able toward the circle's perimeter. The sky seemed to boil as he passed among the monoliths.

He advanced another dozen paces, then had to pause to rest. He looked back to the place of battle, to the place where the two figures still stood locked in sorcerous embrace. Then the scene was imprinted upon his brain as the skies opened and a sheet of fire fell upon the far end of the circle.

Dazzled, he raised his hand to shield his eyes. When he lowered it, he saw the stones falling, soundless, many of them fading from sight. The rain began to slow immediately. Sorcerer and sorceress had vanished along with much of the structure of the still-fading place. The horses were nowhere to be seen. He looked about him and saw a good-sized stone. He headed for it and seated himself. He unfastened his breastplate and removed it, dropping it to the ground. His side throbbed and he held it tightly. He doubled forward and rested his face on his left hand.

The rains continued to slow and finally ceased. The wind died. The mists returned.

He breathed deeply and thought back upon the conflict. This, this was the thing for which he had remained after all the others, the thing for which he had waited, for so long. It was over now, and he could rest.

There was a gap in his consciousness. He was brought to awareness again by a light. A steady glow passed between his fingers, pierced his eyelids. He dropped his hand and raised his head, opening his eyes.

It passed slowly before him in a halo of white light. He removed his sticky fingers from his side and rose to his feet to follow it. Solid, glowing, glorious and pure, not at all like the image in the chamber, it led him on out across the moonlit plain, from dimness to brightness to dimness, until the mists enfolded him as he reached at last to embrace it.

HERE ENDETH THE BOOK OF LAUNCELOT,
LAST OF THE NOBLE KNIGHTS OF THE
ROUND TABLE, AND HIS ADVENTURES
WITH RAXAS, THE HOLLOW KNIGHT,
AND MERLIN AND MORGAN LE FAY,
LAST OF THE WISE FOLK OF CAMELOT,
IN HIS QUEST FOR THE SANGREAL.

QUO FAS ET GLORIA DUCUNT.



ROGER ZELAZNY was born in Cleveland, Ohio, studied at Western Reserve University and Columbia University, and then went to work for the Social Security Administration in 1962. In that year he also started writing professionally; by 1966, his first novel, *This Immortal*, appeared; and in 1969 he became a full-time writer. He's married to Judith Alene Callahan; they have two sons, Devin Joseph and Jonathan Trent. They live in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

RANDALL GARRETT wrote his first science fiction story when he was 14, and it was published in *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1944, after John W. Campbell had held it for years. By that time, Mr. Garrett was in the South Pacific with the United States Marines. Subsequently, he studied chemistry, worked in several industrial laboratories, and then turned to full-time writing. Recent books include *Murder and Magic*, a collection of his Lord Darcy stories, and *Takeoff*, due shortly from Donning.

SAMUEL R. DELANY is a New Yorker by birth; after some years in England and a few more in San Francisco, he lives there again with his five-year-old daughter. His most recent books are a semiological critique of science fic-

tion, *The American Shore*, and a full-color comic book—with the artist Howard V. Chaykin—*Empire*.

"Gorgik" is one of a set of five stories that will appear soon from Bantam Books as *Tales of Neveryon*, while the author is now at work on a far-future SF epic.

JACK C. HALDEMAN II was born 18 December 1941 in Kentucky. He studied life sciences at Johns Hopkins University. He's worked as a medical technician, a biomedical researcher, and a biological researcher. In 1974, he was the co-chairman of the World Science Fiction Convention in Washington, D.C.

JOE HALDEMAN was born 9 June 1943 in Oklahoma. Like his brother, he grew up in Puerto Rico; New Orleans; Washington, D.C.; and Alaska. He studied physics and chemistry at the University of Maryland, was drafted, and fought in the Central Highlands of Vietnam with the 4th Division. Since 1970, he has been a full-time writer.

He now lives in Florida with his wife, Gay. He reports three books in various stages of incompleteness: *The Endless Horizon*, *Worlds*, and *Starschool*.





GHOSTS

By Keith Minnion

Illustrated by Rich Sternbach

□ You know how hard it is, sometimes, to wake up and uncradle, to set up the primary systems and sequences and face the new morning. You know how frustrating it can be, too, to look out upon nothing but clean space, no debris in the cubics you have planned to sweep this day. Or worse, a motherlode of junk, but with a Royal Patrol deployed at its perimeter to guard it. You know the futility of it, then: Uranus is the Lord's Land, north and south, inner ring and outer ring. The Patrols are *everywhere*. How long can you evade them? How long before you are cornered and caught? Will they find you today?

Shooting out to Neptune won't help; it's Royal too. And of course Jupiter/Saturn is Union. No, this is it. *This is it.*

Look at it: Uranus, in the night. The rings are fine lace; this close you can see right through them, like ghosts. And

the planet itself: pale porcelain green with hints of ultramarine woven throughout. Beautiful monster; ugly princess. Skim it, sieve it, rake it with field generator sails scarred by the planet wind blowing inbound. And respect the princess, the monster, for though it is your life, now, it can just as easily be your death.

Lonely, solitary work. You like that part of it, anyway. You came here to be alone, and so far you have been. Except for the voices. Like Jonquil told you so long ago (has it been so long?) there are voices here, in the cold Uranus space, so very far from home. No one knows about them, no one hears them but you. Keep it that way. Keep it that way.

No one understood about the voices on Earth. No one wanted to. Chrise! Push those memories away, shove them back to the shadows where they belong. You shudder, remembering.

Yet they are your friends, your only friends, Jonquil, Ben, Jonas and the rest, all of the voices, they have always been your friends, always.

Don't worry about it, Huck. Don't worry about anything. Just sweep what dirty space (dirty *Royal* space, managing a smile) you can find, and for Chrise's sake keep it all to yourself. There must be enough junk left outside of the clouds to live upon. There must be. There has to be. Wake up, Huck. Uncradle, there is one more day to face.

"Huck!" Whispered. "Are you still awake?"

The small boy turned his eyes into the shadows.

"You better get to sleep, Huck. If Mara catches you she's going to beat you again."

It was Jonquil, one of them, the first voice, in fact, who had ever spoken to him.

"I'm afraid, Jon."

"Afraid? Afraid of what? Mara?"

"You're old," the boy muttered, burying his face into his blanket. "You don't have to be afraid."

"I'm not that old, Huck. Why, I was only ten—Earth ten—when I was—"

Light exploded into the room, lancing across the floor, splitting the darkness to aching yellow. Huck was caught in it, eyes wide, tears already forming.

"Were you at it again?" demanded the woman in the doorway. "Who's in here with you?"

There was no one, of course, no one at all. Huck huddled in the corner, pulling his blankets up around him. Mara did not understand about the voices. She just didn't understand.

"I didn't mean it," Huck pleaded.

Mara stared down at him, breathing loudly, barely holding her anger in check.

"I'm sorry, Mara," the five-year-old whined. "Really, I'm—"

"Close your mouth, and your eyes as well, and go to sleep, dammit!" The woman whirled around, grabbing the door. "And I don't want to hear any more of this talking to yourself!"

Slam, door.

Silence.

"Huck?"

He shut his eyes tightly.

"Huck . . . ?"

He hesitated at the entrance.

The Royal Court seated at the table in the center of the huge chamber rose as one. "Come," the nearest one said. "Please . . ."

Another indicated a seat, which the young man took, noticeably grateful to have a place to put himself. His nervousness permeated the chamber, causing several of the Court to flash him reassuring smiles and murmur pleasantries.

A very strained-looking woman in full dress rose from the head of the table, cleared her throat, and everyone quieted. The young man glanced at all their faces, looking for answers to—

"My colleagues and I wish to thank you for agreeing to this audience," the woman said. "And of course you must be wondering why you are here..."

He spread his hands; he had not "agreed" to anything; he had been *brought*. Should he—?

The woman continued: "My name is Reginald, Chief Secretary to His Majesty Lord Talshire. You have, no doubt, heard the name..."

He swallowed dryly. Lord Talshire owned Uranus and Neptune. Plain and simply owned them. Of course he had heard the name. "Why . . . ?" he managed.

"Yes," Reginald said. "We must get swiftly to the point, since there is a definite time factor involved." She activated a table screen and, glancing at it, rattled off: "Your name is Sammael Huck Jastrow, Earth. Twenty-three years old, born and raised same. You are presently engaged in a relatively small-scope illegal scavenging concern in His Majesty's Uranus space—"

Huck found his voice quite suddenly: "Illegal! It's—not—"

Reginald raised her hand impatiently. "Please, that is not our concern at the moment. This next bit of information, however, is: you have been rated the best three-prong proximity pilot outward of Mars, the best, perhaps, in the System." She smiled falsely. "You are valuable, Mr. Jastrow. At any time you are that. But to us now, at this time, you are *priceless*."

Huck swallowed again. "What's the job?"

Secretary Reginald's smile broadened. "The job involves piloting a proximity shuttle due inward—"

Huck flashed puzzlement. "Sunward?"

"Oh, no." The Secretary—almost unconsciously—pointed to the floor. "Uranus," she said.

"You are to fly closer to Uranus than anyone has ever previously attempted. You are to effect the rescue of a skimmer-class craft which at this moment is trapped in a slowly decaying orbit. The ship does not possess power enough to get up to freedom."

"And you picked me?"

The Secretary sighed patiently. "Prior to this morning you were the *fourth*-best proximity pilot, Mr. Jastrow. We picked three others before you, and this morning, before the Royal Police paid you a visit, those three failed in the very mission you are about to engage upon." The secretary paused to note the effect of her words, then continued. "They piloted a four-seater, of course, a *Corsair*-class

refitted specifically for proximity flight. You will pilot an equally refitted two-seater shuttle—much more powerful for its mass—making, we hope, for a more successful configuration."

"You seem certain I'm going to agree to this," Huck said, slowly.

"There is nothing to agree to," the Secretary replied. "You will do it." She paused again. "We have approached you in this manner—" spreading her arms to include the rest of the Court—"to assure you of our sincerity, our good will, and of our seriousness. You must certainly realize the political and economic repercussions, not to mention your own monetary compensation . . ."

Huck glanced about the room, then down to his hands, and finally directly at the Secretary. "It has to be someone pretty big, then," he said.

"Surely you must realize?"

"Who?" Raising his voice a little.

"Why, his Majesty Lord Talshire, of course."

The voices had kept a respectful silence up to this point. But then one of them—Jonas—spoke up quite clearly: "Don't trust them past your shadow. But don't worry, they've laid it out fairly clean, and we'll be with you all the way."

Huck opened his mouth, then closed it. Then, to Secretary Reginald: "When?"

"Within the hour, as soon as we ferry you to Miranda and have you tuned up."

One of the Court put out his hand then.

Huck decided not to shake it.

"Spread 'em," the doctor said.

Huck obliged. He shivered when she applied the probes.

"Sorry," she said. "No time to warm them up. My superiors caught me as much by surprise as they did you. Hold it there."

Huck stared at the white light band over the cradle, aware that it wasn't hurting his eyes.

"When was your last tune-up, Mr. Jastrow?"

"One Earth year, sir."

"Ah-hah." She fiddled at an instrument console.

"Quarter-year tune-ups are mandatory by law for your type of work, you know," she said. "And call me Sylvia, please."

Huck glanced at her, surprised, then returned his gaze to the light. "Tunes cost too much," he said in answer. "I'm still trying to float."

"Triton?"

"No. Earth, originally."

"Hah. I should have guessed from the accent." She caught his eye, a smile forming. "Try not to feel this," she said then, and something clicked. Huck did, however, in every single nerve of his body. Christ! he thought in the middle, I hate this!

Then it was over, the probes fell away, and Huck tried

(without success) to focus his eyes.

"Congratulations," Sylvia patted his rump. "You'll feel better in a minute. Now for the form-filling." She hit a toggle. "Tape's running. Do you verify the procedure, etcetera, etcetera?"

Huck managed a nod.

"You have to—"

"Verified," he gasped.

The boy saw the other children and paused. "Jonquil?" She murmured close to his ear: "Stay away from them, Huck. They are waiting for you. The big one there with the ball wants to fight."

The boy sagged against the wall, sinking into the shadows. "But why? What do I do to make them want to beat me up, to hate me like they do?"

Jonquil sighed. "It's not your fault, Huck. If anyone's, it's ours. No one can hear us but you. You're special that way. I haven't been able to find anyone else alive who can hear me as well as you can. I don't think anyone else has either. You're the only one we can talk to. That's why you are so special. That's why we help you whenever we can."

"But what's so important about talking to me? I'm just a kid."

Jonquil laughed sadly. "If only you could know," she said. "If only you could know how important it really is, how important you really are."

Huck peered out of his shadow and saw the children playing a game he wanted more than anything else in the world to join. If only Jonquil and the rest of them were real, he thought. If only . . . but that thought chilled him so much he wanted to cry.

He eased into the cradle; several screens lit up. When he took hold of the grips, more were activated. He felt the ship flow through the grips and cradle and into his body; it felt right; it would be okay.

"Disengage on your signal," the dock chief said.

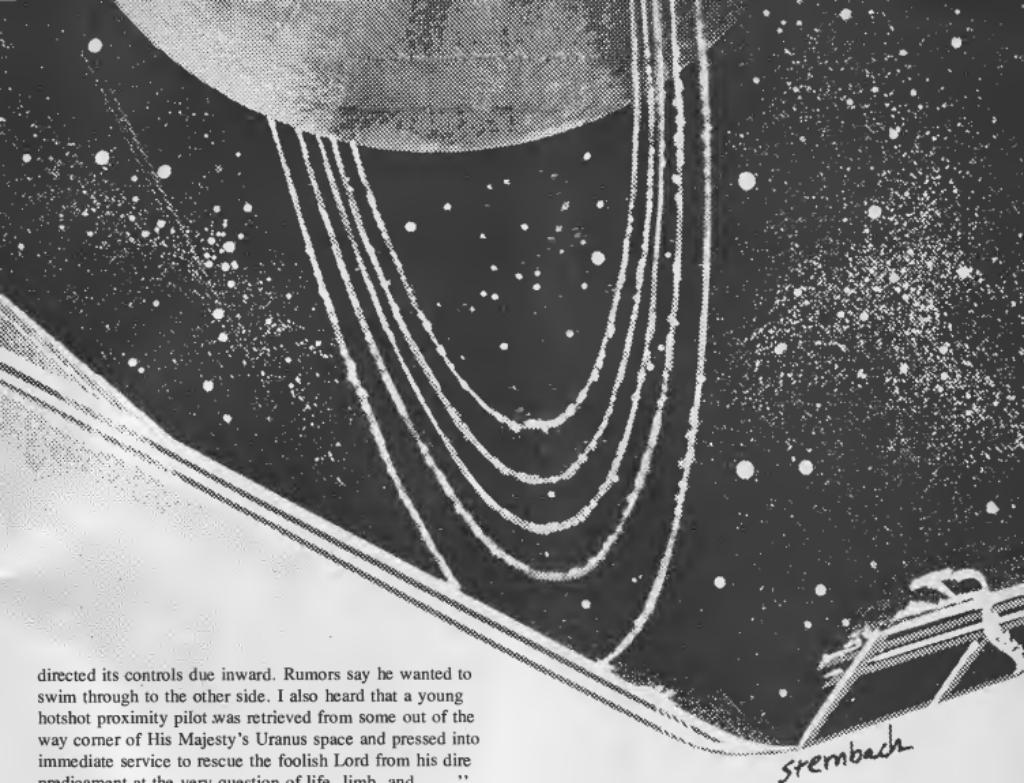
"Right."

Huck went through the pre-flight check methodically, purposefully, taking his time, then started the sequence. Within moments opposing fields were set up and the shuttle fell away from the dock. It gained speed steadily, falling away from Miranda, the moon, falling into the green-blue gas giant that was Uranus.

Talshire's skimmer was a scant thousand kilometers outside the first substantial methane cloud layer. Totally immersed in the magnetosphere, its field generator shields excited the ion wind to white luminescence. Huck had a visual on it, even from his present height: like a silver comet with an achingly straight tail, below, inward, a few steps from Death's door.

"Tracking you," said the dock chief.

"Thanks."



Stremback

directed its controls due inward. Rumors say he wanted to swim through to the other side. I also heard that a young hotshot proximity pilot was retrieved from some out of the way corner of His Majesty's Uranus space and pressed into immediate service to rescue the foolish Lord from his dire predicament at the very question of life, limb, and . . ."

and then she smiled, ". . . money?"

Huck looked at her incredulously. "You think I'm in this for the money?"

"Well, glory, at least . . . "

Huck half-rose from his seat, his expression furious, but when he saw what was in her eyes he collapsed back and muttered a quiet obscenity.

Sylvia patted his hand. "I know how it is," she said. "They got me the same way. There was this certain prince with a certain rare exobiological bug, and there too was I—young and innocent graduate student at Triton S.T. who happened to be doing extensive research on the same said bug—who got whisked away to cure him."

"Did you?"

"Unfortunately, yes; he's piloting that skimmer this very moment. The irony, I know, must be devastating."

"Why didn't you leave, after?"

Sylvia laughed lightly. "If I had, then I wouldn't have met you."

"Cute. I was wondering when you would get around to that. You're my arenar?"

She stiffened slightly; he felt it in the touch of her hand. "I volunteered," she said.

"Oh." He looked down at his drink again. "Sorry."

"I also wanted to spend time with you to ask some questions."

Now it was Huck's turn to smile. "I guess I owe you that, then." He paused to drain half of his glass. "Okay. What's up?"

"I heard the tape of your 'dry run' just before. At two points on it there was a particular type of disturbance which I could not attribute either to the dock chief, to you, or to the mechanisms involved."

"What kind of disturbances?"

"Well, they are difficult to describe with words. I knew what they were, at any rate, though I don't think anyone else who heard the tape did."

Huck felt something touch his spine. Apprehension? "Just what exactly are you talking about?"

"I've been following the work of several University colleagues in the post-mortem life sciences."

"Isn't that a contradiction of—"

"Obviously. It's still relatively new, say, five years since the scientific community accepted the basic premises. Quickly and simply put, these scientists have succeeded in proving that certain kinds of life—specific types of

Falling. Falling into the green-blue disk on the main screen. The planet seemed unnaturally flat—strangely, the rings contributed to this illusion. The shuttle's arching descent was directly toward them. Of course he would pass far inward of the innermost, but the visual threat was staggering.

Huck hated visuals down this far. He looked away, then back again. No longer flat, the more he stared the more the planet began to look concave, distinctly concave, like a bowl, a well, and he was going into it, headlong, eyes wide, a green hole in space . . .

"Trim it up there, Huck. You're drifting."

" . . . okay."

Field sails blossomed out like the wings of a beetle. This should be okay, he thought. He just should have known better than to look down the planet's throat. The gas giants were dangerous that way. Their utter immensity was difficult to deal with in so close.

"I'm going blind for a while," he said finally.

"Though you might." The dock chief chuckled. "That Chrising mother of a planet is a lot to take all at once."

"Yeah." Several screens blanked to grey.

"I was down pretty far a couple of times," the dock chief continued, "droning, of course. Never so low in a shuttle, though." A pause. "Hey, you're doing real fine there, Huck."

Sure. Yeah, I must be out of my mind, doing this, being here. I really must be insane. He rubbed his hands on the cradle cushion. Chrise, I'm scared, he thought suddenly. What am I doing here? Another screen blanked.

"You going to sleep on us, Huck?"

"Sorry." The screen went on again.

He was sweating a little. One of the screens showed him saddled in the cradle, naked, perspiration shining on his belly and thighs. He looked down, wiped himself; and on the screen he looked down and wiped himself.

Jonas whispered in his ear: "My God, even now this frightens me. The only other time I was down this far I . . . never got back up. I didn't have equipment like this, though."

Huck glanced about the cabin futilely. He couldn't reply to him, couldn't do anything but sit and listen.

"How much longer?" he asked, eventually.

"ETA in seven minutes, thirty-six seconds. Check over that docking sequence in the meantime, please. We want it to be your best."

Huck exploded at that. "What the Chrise is that supposed to mean? You give me forty-five minutes to get a fifteen-point procedure down cold? You guys must be crazier than I am! You honestly expect this to work? For Chrising—"

"Hold on . . . news . . . just hold on a moment, Huck, please."

"I'm not going anywhere," he spit out, feeling blood

pounding behind his ears.

" . . . okay," the dock chief said a few seconds later. "You've got a temporary reprieve. His Majesty has managed to trim his orbit enough to give him an estimate two Earth days—about forty-nine hours—more time until his ship falls too low for effective rescue. If you want to know the truth, he was monitoring your transmission and agreed with you. So you've got a day and a half . . . chalk this one up as a dry run, then. Okay?"

Huck shook his head slowly, cursing every single one of them. Jonas said: "They're recording that heart and blood pressure of yours, you know. Calm down; don't give them the satisfaction . . ."

"Right you are," Huck muttered.

"What's that, Huck?" The dock chief asked.

"Nothing. Just feed me the climb-and-away sequence. My hands are itchy; I need something to do down here."

" . . . right."

He found a corner of the Company bar where most of the lights couldn't find him and grabbed it, trying very hard to forget just about everything that was in his head. The two Royal Policemen guarding him retired to a nearby table, trying unsuccessfully to appear inconspicuous.

"When do you make the real run?"

He looked up. She slid into the seat opposite him.

"Little over a day," he said, returning his gaze to the drink on the table. "How's the slash-and-sew business?"

"Aah. Huck has finally found his voice. At our first meeting—as I recall—I couldn't get you past monosyllables. You prefer 'Huck' to 'Mr. Jastrow,' don't you?"

"Yeah. Huck's fine."

"And you can still call me Sylvia." She tapped her fingers on the tabletop, watching him.

He looked up again. "You want a drink?"

She shook her head. "But I would like to have a talk. Moons are small—you can't help but run into people. And Miranda's a small moon. Actually I've been keeping you tightly beamed since your tune." She reached across and touched his arm. He made as though to pull away, but stopped himself. "Then you heard what happened," he said.

"I heard that a young fool named Talshire took out a Royal skimmer in one of his usual drunk/high states and

intelligently controlled energies, actually—continue after physical, material life ends."

That hit Huck like walking into a wall. "You mean . . . ghosts?"

"Grossly put, with ridiculous superstitious connotations, but . . . yes. Ghosts."

Huck went cold inside, his face slowly draining of all color. He suddenly did not like the turn of the conversation.

Sylvia continued: "So far they have only been able to gain direct evidence on photographic emulsion films and certain magnetic sound-recording tapes. Deceased individuals appear to effect consistent recognizable changes in these materials."

"And that's what you say you saw in the flight tape?"

"Well, not 'saw' so much as 'heard,' but yes, I did."

"Which means?"

"That there was a presence either with you in the shuttle or with the dock chief."

"But . . ."

"But I have a feeling it was you. I checked your records, of course, and came across a statement by one of your mothers, the one named Mara."

Huck abruptly stood, knocking over the remainder of his drink. The two police at the nearby table looked up briefly. "I must say you are thorough," he said, barely managing to keep control of himself. He wiped at the spilled liquor, trying to conceal the emotions flashing across his face.

"Hey," Sylvia said softly, stopping him. "Hey, I understand."

He looked at her, totally exposed, totally vulnerable.

"You've got a couple of hours," she said then. "Would you . . . ?"

Huck was nineteen, and he looked it. He had spent three days at the Newark docks with little food and even less sleep, trying to get off, to go *out*. However, he had found the docks a definite, dismaying anticlimax. The big glamour ships were all in orbit, or on the Moon. The largest ones on the ground were personnel transports, two or three thrusting their prows above the surrounding derricks and odd superstructures; but the most common craft were skimpy four-cradle shuttles. The necessary considerations, air and gravity, made the entire Newark operation excessively complicated. Which all added up to any dock on Earth being essentially outmoded, outdated and fading. But Earth was where he had been born and raised and trained. He had come waving his three-prong pilot rating, which made him—he also found to his dismay—about as desirable as nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine of the other three-prongers bumming the docks.

The voices were a help, though.

"He's not looking, Huck. Now!"

And he lifted three oranges from the counter, certain of success.

"I can't go on like this, guys," he whispered to Ben and Jonquil and any of the others who were listening.

"However long it takes, Huck. However long it takes."

"A gentleman crouched by that piling there, Huck," Ben said suddenly. "See him?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So he intends to relieve you of the oranges, most likely with the knife—its vibrating mechanism thankfully in disrepair—which he has hidden in his cloak."

Huck nodded, and as he passed the grease-smearred bum he tossed him one of the fruits. Surprised, the would-be attacker could only grab for it while Huck walked out of reach and out of danger. "Thanks, team," he said.

You are a hard person to understand. You are extremely complex, or utterly, utterly simple. You just can't decide which.

He took off his pants, and then his tunic.

"Gh," she said. "Your back."

His expression in the shadows: vacant, tired. "You're the doctor," he said. "What's the diagnosis?"

"Huck, really."

"No, really. What's it look like to you?" And turned to face her, to touch her, the expression still there.

"You . . . someone . . . well, you've been through some terrible beatings a long time ago . . . oh, Christe . . ."

He hugged her. "Sorry, I'm being cruel. Bitter, actually. Sometimes I spread it around. I bet Mara forgot to include this in the report you read, anyway."

"It was she who . . . ?"

"She was a very frustrated lady . . . no one knew why I was different, and I was the youngest of that Group's children at the time. I spent a lot of time by myself, hiding . . . it was hard to fit in."

"You could have had the scars taken care of, though. Medical facilities on—"

Huck put his fingers lightly on her lips. "It makes for great conversation in bed," he said, grinning. "Besides, like I told you, my scavenging business isn't really floating."

"But after tomorrow you'll be—"

"After tomorrow I'll probably be dead."

"But I thought the extra time—"

"The extra time has allowed me to get the sequencing down fairly well, true. But still, no one has ever done a rescue like this before and succeeded. The odds are definitely not leaning in my direction." He paused, looking at her in the darkness. "Hey, lady, I thought we were here to make love."

"Were we?"

And they fell together, murmuring quietly.

He awoke later, gasping, tangled in sheets. The darkness was absolute. He stared into it, his body shaking

uncontrollably for a moment, perspiration running down his ribs.

"Huck?" Sleepily.

"It's nothing, Sylvia." He took a breath, closed his eyes, then opened them again. ". . . it's nothing."

"Oh, Huck!" In the gloom he knew she was looking at him. "Something," she said, almost whispering.

He lay back. "I had a nightmare—drowning in an ammonia sea—the usual. It's—" he stopped himself, breathing heavily.

"Huck, you can get help, you know."

"For what? The nightmares?"

"My colleagues, the ones doing the life-after-death studies . . . if you agree to examinations, I'm sure they—"

He cut her off with a look. Then, shakily: "Please, let's just not talk about that. Really. Okay?"

She nodded, sensing correctly that she had stumbled again on one of Huck's great fears, perhaps his greatest.

But then he surprised her by chuckling.

"What . . . ?"

He turned to her. "Oh, I forgot. You couldn't hear . . . 'The voices?'"

"Yeah. One of them just commented on your technique."

"My what?"

"Are you embarrassed?"

"No . . . I just . . . well, it's a little bit of a shock to have to all of a sudden deal with something . . ."

"Unreal?"

"No, of course not . . . it's just . . ."

Huck gathered her close. "How about I ask them to give us a little privacy from now on, okay?"

"Would you?"

"I just did."

They lay in silence for a while, then Sylvia said: "Well?"

"Well what?"

"How was it?"

"How were you what?"

"You said the voice rated my—"

"Oh, yeah. He—his name is Jonas—used an archaic word, but I think you can translate; he said you were 'dynamite'."

Sylvia lay quietly for a little while longer. Then: "Tell Jonas I said 'thank you,' please."

You can see what is happening. Alone with yourself, alone with your thoughts, you can see what is, and what will be. Never before have you had to face this. Never before. Your choices are there, clearly in front of you. Can you do it? Are you strong enough? Either way, every way is an easy out, every way but one.

Suddenly—Oh Christ, it chills you—the thought comes. It has been lurking back there, in the shadows, waiting to leap out and drag you down: *you want to fail, don't you.*

Don't you?

"Well, congratulations, Huck," Jonquil said.

"Thanks."

Nothing needed to be explained. Everyone had heard, had seen, had experienced . . . Huck had managed a third-class berth on a Royal light cruiser docked and running out of Tycho. The personnel carrier was already stowing supplies and incidental cargo. Huck squinted through the smog, and picked out its prow from the others, his emotions thrilling to the prospect of his first trip off-planet. Destination was Oberon, a cold Uranus rock, but that didn't matter. It was off, it was away, it was outside.

"If you ever come back," Ben said, "we will be here."

That caught Huck off guard. "What do you mean? Aren't you coming with me?"

Silence, for a moment. Then, Jonquil: "We can't leave here, Huck. We died here. The ashes of our bodies are here. We can't go."

"I never knew."

"We never thought you would actually leave, or we would have told you."

"Then there won't be any voices, no one at all, after I lift?"

"Oh, of course. You'll meet others."

"But the law says all people who die get sent inwards to Earth. I remember reading that somewhere."

"And you remember correctly. But not all corpses can be recovered. No, you will meet others, and they will be your friends, just as we were."

"Are," Huck corrected.

"No, dear Huck," Jonquil said gently. "Were."

"Let's go," he said, settling in. "Let's get the show moving."

"You've got it, cowboy. On your signal."

Screens off, now, and he was away. Uranus was down there . . . instruments told him that much . . . but he had no wish to see it. Not this time. He had a headache from the realigning tune Sylvia had given him after breakfast. Plus he hadn't eaten the breakfast, which only made the headache worse.

"How does she feel?"

Meaning the shuttle, not his head. "Fine."

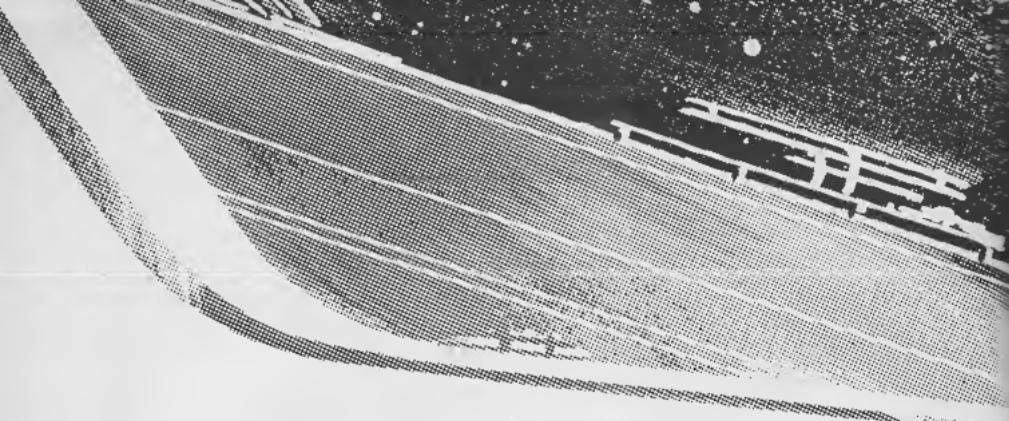
"We were a little concerned about a flutter in your dorsal sail cluster. Would you mind checking it?"

Like a hand traced lightly over the spine of his back.

"Nothing. Seems okay."

Gravity tugged at him, gently, gently. He turned on a few of his aft screens.

Miranda was vaguely round. It was as though its sphere had been broken into pieces and then put back together without aid from the original plan. Seen from several thousand kilometers it resembled a green flower on black



velvet, irregular in outline, reflecting the color of the planet it orbited.

Huck hung in the velvet between the flower and the green-blue ringed gas giant, the shuttle enclosing him, helping him maneuver as he fell. He completed a number of operations himself manually to give him something to do before the real work began.

"You're doing fine," the dock chief said. "Five minutes till—"

"Yeah, right."

This is it, kid. This is the one. You have to go through with it. And it all depends on you, now. Just you.

There, the spark, the comet trail of ionized plasma. The Lord Talshire's skimmer had ample shielding—he could afford to waste it thus—whereas Huck's shuttle didn't, and Huck couldn't. He would have to dip, grab, and then climb out as fast as possible, hopefully with sails intact. And though simply described, the maneuver was in reality incredibly difficult. So difficult that—

The comet disappeared, then; like a light turned off: there, then gone. Huck cursed. This had not been anticipated. Not at all.

The dock chief cut in immediately: "Seems His Majesty has gone a bit inward. We've lost all contact up here—plasma interference has scrambled everything. How do you read it?"

"The same. So what do we do? Is he dead?"

"Checking . . . "

From beside him, Jonas whispered: "We know you can't answer, but listen: Lord Talshire is very much alive. He's trimmed his orbit beneath the interference layer. You can still get him."

Huck stared at his instruments, gripping the controls with whitened knuckles.

"Trust us, Huck. We can help you through it."

Then, from above: "We've got nothing here, Huck. If he leveled off in time then he's still alive. You're directed to go through with it, anyway."

"We know what we're saying, Huck," Jonas said. "In my time I would have called this a piece of cake. Agree to it, and quickly. You're running out of time."

Huck looked at his instruments again and discovered this was true. He had no choice, he realized suddenly. He really had no choice at all.

"Is the doctor there?" He asked abruptly.

"No . . . this is a restricted—"

"Well then find her and tell her something for me."

"Huck, the time factor—"

"Just shut up and listen. Tell her it's going to be all right. Tell her I've got help." And pushed the grips forward, plunging into the interference layer before any reply was possible.

You don't want anyone to know about them, about the voices. You've lived with that so long it has become part of you. They must be a secret, they have to be. No one hears voices, no one but people who should be locked up. Locked up. Picked apart. Put back together again. Happy, vacant. Gone.

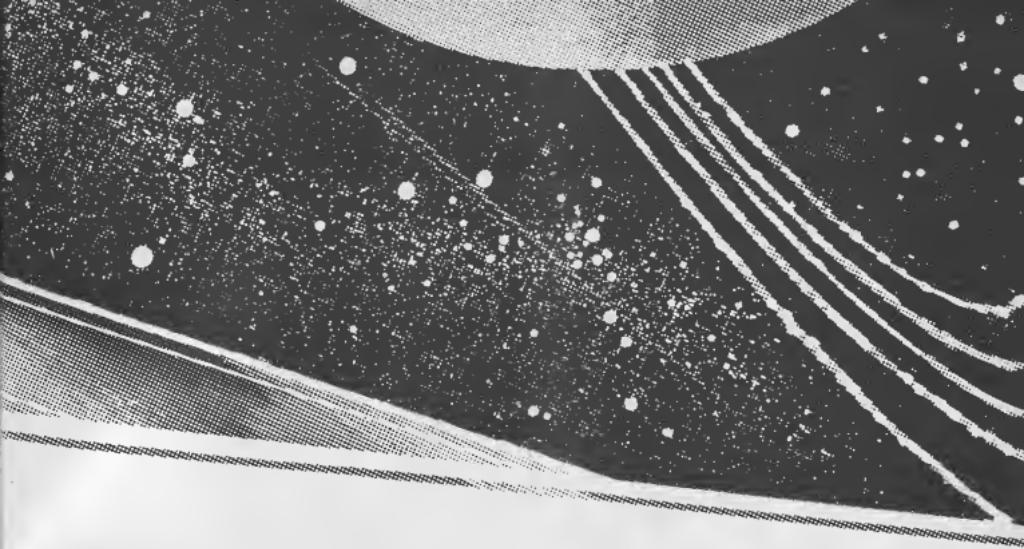
Why didn't they just leave you alone? It was so good before, it really was, solitary, sweeping the air clean, dodging the Royal patrols, making that tiny amount of profit that let you float at the surface that much longer. Christ, the silences out there were magnificent, the oneness, the universality . . . the safety . . .

You are ripped open, now. You are spadeagled, flayed to the bone. *Someone knows*. She says she understands. Trust her? Trust her? Everyone wants your trust, now. Everyone.

"Listen to me, Huck," Jonas said. "Listen carefully and do what I tell you. I'll work *through* you. It can be done."

Huck stared down at the controls, his mouth slack, his hands clutching the hand grips. "I . . . I can't. . . ."

"You have to! You have to be willing or I can't do a



Chrising thing!"

Huck felt Jonas near him, and the others, all the others, all of them with one thought, all of them . . .

He closed his eyes and swallowed, his paled cheeks flushing red. "How—?"

"Just sit there, let yourself go limp . . . yeah . . . now don't panic on me . . . you and I are about to do some maneuvers with this crackerbox that are bound to scare the living . . ." he paused, ". . . just relax. . . ."

Huck's hands moved by themselves, then. Deftly, to the console, marking out a sequence. Huck watched them. Then all the forward screens snapped on, and he stifled a scream.

"Keep your eyes open Huck! I can't do this blind!"

Green hell, deep, hot, steaming jungle of liquid emerald blades reaching up to—oh, please. Oh, please. Every past fear was banished instantly in the face of this. Ultimate insanity, demon clouds, death seas . . . got to . . . got to—

"Give me some help, please. I can't keep his eyes open or his head in place."

There, something . . . a speck of black against the chaos, a defect on the screen? . . . Huck focused on it in desperation, trying to orient himself, to place himself within some sane frame of—

A grappling waldo swept across a starboard screen; Huck gasped in relief, recognizing it. Then again, a twin to the first, across a port screen.

"You're doing great. Just great. Concentrate on the skimmer. Any moment now . . ."

A power dive, all sails furled, silver bullet with arms, with hands, reaching. Huck watched, fascinated, as the skimmer grew in size in the forward screen, the Royal crest glittering on its bow. . . . "Help me, Huck. You've

got to help me now. I need all that three-prong expertise. Come on, pal. . . ."

Face it. Face yourself. Face the choice: two ways, two paths, up or down. There, in your hands, the power . . .

You know how it is. You know how hard it is, sometimes. . . .

"Do it, Jonas, just do it."

Contact. The shuttle vibrated with sudden, staccato engine bursts. A horizon appeared on the forward screen, then swung up and away—

"Help me, Huck!"

—and appeared again, lowered, and was lost to an incredibly sane, unbelievably perfect starfield.

Sails shot out; the field generators strained toward overload; the vibration was continuous, was everywhere, was everything.

Huck glanced at the appropriate screen and saw the skimmer grappled securely alongside the shuttle. Sudden friend, sudden companion in the madness. "Is it over?" He whispered.

"The worst of it is. Both spacecraft are intact, and the Prince is alive. How about you?"

Huck let out his breath, wiped the sweat from his face and neck. "Alive," he said. "Alive, too."

He opened and closed the door quietly behind him.

In the shadows she turned; he saw a wetness on her cheeks.

"Hey," whispering, standing by the door.

". . . Huck?"

"We did it," he said, a smile forming. "Hey, we did it."



FROST AND THUNDER

By Randall Garrett
Illustrated By Jim Odert

□ Ulglossen was dabbling in polydimensional energy flows again.

Do not try to understand Ulglossen. Ulglossen's time was—is—will be—three million years after Homo sapiens ruled Earth, and Ulglossen's species is no more to be understood by us than we could be understood by Australopithecus.

To say, then, that Ulglossen built a "time machine" is as erroneous—and as truthful—as saying that a big industrial computer of the late 20th Century is a device for counting with pebbles.

Doing polydimensional vector analysis mentally was, for Ulglossen, too simple and automatic to be called child's play. Actually constructing the mechanism was somewhat more difficult, but Ulglossen went about it with the same toilsome joy that a racing buff goes about rebuilding his Ferrari. When it was finished, Ulglossen viewed it with the equivalent of pride.

In doing the mental math, Ulglossen had rounded off at the nineteenth decimal place, for no greater accuracy than that was needed.

But, as a result, Ulglossen's "machine" caused slight eddy currents in the time flow as it passed.

The resulting

effect was much the same as that of an automobile going down a freeway and passing a wadded ball of paper. The paper is picked up and carried a few yards down the freeway before it falls out of the eddy currents and is dropped again.

Ulglossen was not unaware of that fact; it was simply that Ulglossen ignored it.

The device, you see, was merely a side effect of Ulglossen's real work, which was the study of the attenuation of the universal gravitational constant over a period of millions of millenia. Ulglossen happened to be on Earth, and had some experiments to perform in the very early pre-Cambrian. Ulglossen went back to do so.

I'll try to tell this the best I can. I don't expect you to believe it because, in the first place, I haven't a shred of proof, and, in the second place, I wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't actually experienced it.

Sure, I might have dreamed it. But it was too solid, too detailed, too logical, too *real* to have been a dream. So it happened, and I'm stuck with it.

It begins, I suppose, when I got the letter from Sten Örnfeld. I've known Sten for years. We've fought together in some pretty odd places, argued with each other about the damndest things, and once even quarreled over the same woman. (He won.) He's a good drinking buddy, and he'll back a friend in a pinch. What more do you want?

A few years back, Sten and I got interested in what was then the relatively new sport of combat pistol, down in southern California. It's a game that requires fast draw,



fast shooting, fast reloading, and accuracy to make points. One of the rules is that you *must* use full-charge service cartridges. No half-charge wadcutters allowed.

We both enjoyed it.

Then, I didn't see Sten for some time. I didn't think much about it. Sten does a lot of traveling, but, basically, he's a Swede, and he has to go home every so often. I'm only half Swede, and I was born in the United States. Sweden is a lovely country, but it just isn't home to me.

Anyway, I got this letter addressed to me, Theodore Sorenson, with a Stockholm postmark. Sten, so he claimed, had introduced combat pistol shooting to Sweden, and had built a range on his property. He was holding a match in September, and would I come? There would be plenty of *akvavit*.

He hadn't needed to add that last, but it helped. I made plane reservations and other arrangements.

You would not believe how hard it is to get a handgun into Sweden legally. (I don't know how hard it would be to do it illegally; I've never tried.) Even though Sten Örnfeld had all kinds of connections in high places and had filed a declaration of intent or something, informing the government of his shooting match, and had gotten the government's permission, it was rough sledding. I had to produce all kinds of papers identifying the weapon, and papers showing that I had never been convicted of a felony, and on and on. Fortunately, Sten's letter had warned me about all that. Still, just filling out papers and signing my name must have used up a good liter of ink.

Eventually, they decided I could take my .45 Colt Commander into Sweden. Provided, of course, that I brought it back out again; I couldn't sell it, give it away, or, presumably, lose it, under dire penalties.

Mine isn't an ordinary, off-the-shelf Colt Commander. I had it rebuilt by Pachmayr of Los Angeles. It has a 4½-inch barrel, a BoMar adjustable combat rear sight, a precision-fit slide with a special Micro barrel-bushing, a special trigger assembly that lets me fire the first shot double action, and a lot of other extra goodies. It's hard-chromed all over, which means it can stand up to a lot of weather without rusting. In a machine rest, I can get a three-inch group at a hundred yards with a hundred shots. When Frank Pachmayr finishes with a Colt Commander, you can damn well bet you're got one of the finest, hardest-hitting handguns in the world.

So I had no intention of selling, giving away, or losing that weapon.

Sten Örnfeld met me at Arlanda Airport and helped me get through the paperwork. My Swedish is as good as his; just as his English is as good as mine—but he knows the ins-and-outs of the local ways better than I do. Then we

got in his plane, and he flew me to his little place in the woods.

Not so little, and more of a forest than woods. It was on the Österdalälven—the Österdal River—on the western slope of the Kjölen, that great ridge of mountains whose peaks separate Norway from Sweden. It was some miles northeast of a little town called Älvadalen, well away from everything.

Sten landed us in a little clearing, and said: "Theodore, we are here."

Sten always called me Theodore, another reason why he was a friend. I have never liked "Ted." My mother was an O'Malley, with red-auburn hair; my father was a blond Swede. Mine came out flaming red-orange. So I was "Ted the Red"—and worse—in school. Like the guy named Sue, it taught me to fight, but I hated it.

Of course, if Sten was speaking Swedish at the time, it came out something like "Taydor" but I didn't mind that.

He showed me through his house, an old-fashioned, sturdy place with the typical high-pitched, snow-shedding roof.

"You're the first one in," he told me. "Sit down and have a little *akvavit*. Unless you're hungry?"

I wasn't. I'd eaten pretty well on the plane. We had *akvavit* and coffee, and some *räggakor* his mother had sent him.

"Tonight," he said, "I'll fix up the spices and the orange rind and the almonds and the raisins, and let 'em soak in the booze overnight for hot *glögg* tomorrow. And I've fixed it up for some people to drive up from Älvadalen with a *julskinka* we'll serve fourteen weeks early."

"So I'm the only one here so far?" I said.

"First arrival," he said. "Which poses a problem."

I sipped more *akvavit*. "Which is?"

"I think—I say I think—you're going to overshoot the whole lot of 'em. Now, I've got this special course laid out, and a lot of 'friend-and-foe' pop-up targets. I was going to let each of you guys run it cold. But there are some of these hard-nosed skvareheads who'd secretly think I took you over the course early so you'd be prepared. They wouldn't say anything, but they'd think it."

"So what do you figure on doing?"

"Well, I haven't set the pop-ups yet; I was going to set 'em in the morning. Instead, I'm going to take all of you over the course before the targets are set, then set 'em up while you guys watch each other here." He roared with laughter. "That will keep you all honest!"

Sten isn't your big Swede; he's a little guy, five-six or so, and I stand six-four. I must outweigh him by thirty-six kilos. I could probably whip him in a fight, but I would be in damn sad condition for a while afterward. I have seen what has happened to a couple of large galoots who thought he'd be an easy pushover. He was standing over them, begging them to get up for more fun, but they couldn't hear him.

"Hey!" he said, "How about checking me out on that

fancy piece of artillery, now that we've managed to get it into the country?"

I was willing. I showed him the Pachmayr conversion of the Colt Commander, and he was fascinated. His final comment was: "Goddam, what a gun!"

When we were glowing nicely warm inside the *akvavit*, and I could taste caraway clear back to my tonsils, Sten put the bottle away. "Got to keep the shootin' eye clear and the shootin' hand steady for tomorrow," he said. "Besides, I've got to do the *glögg* fixin's."

"Need any help?"

"Nope."

"Is there anyplace I could go hose a few rounds through the tube, just to get the feel in this climate?"

"Sure. There's a dead pine about eighty yards due south. I'm going to cut it down for winter fuel later, but I've put a few slugs in it, myself. Make damn heavy logs, I'll bet." He laughed again. Then: "Hey, you got a name for that blaster of yours yet?"

"No. Not yet." Sten had a habit of naming his weapons, but I'd never gone in for the custom much.

"Shame. Good gun should have a name. Never mind; you'll think of one. It's beginning to get late. Dark in an hour and a half. Dress warm. Good shooting."

Dressing warm was no problem. I was ready for it; I knew that the weather can get pretty chilly in the highlands of Sweden in September. Walking from Sten's little plane hangar to his lodge had told me that I wasn't properly dressed for afternoon; I knew good and well that the clothes I was wearing wouldn't be warm enough for dusk.

"What's the forecast for tomorrow, Sten?" I yelled at him in the kitchen.

"Cold and clear!" he yelled back. "Below freezing!"

"I should have known! You call me out of warm California so I can freeze my ass off trying to fire a handgun in Sweden!"

"Damn right! You got to have *some* sort of handicap! Shut up and go shoot!"

It really wasn't cold enough yet, but I decided I'd have a little practice in full insulation. I put on my Scandinavian net long johns, and an aluminized close-weave over that. I get my outdoor clothing from Herter's, in Minnesota; there's no one like them for quality and price. I wore a Guide Association Chamois Cloth tan shirt, Down Arctic pants, and Yukon Leather Pac boots. Over that went the Hudson Bay Down Arctic parka with the frost-free, fur-trimmed hood.

For gloves, I had two choices: the pigskin shooting gloves or the Hudson Bay buckskin one-finger mittens. I shoved the mittens in my parka pocket and put on the shooting gloves. Try 'em both, I told myself.

I'd had the parka specially cut for quick-draw work, with an opening on the right side for the pistol and holster. Before I sealed up the parka, I put on the gunbelt, a special job made for me by Don Hume, of Miami, Oklahoma. It has quick-release leather pockets, five of them, for holding extra magazines. The holster is a quick-draw job made for my sidearm. When Don Hume says, "Whatever the need," he means it.

"Carry on, bartender!" I yelled from the door. "I am

off to the wars!"

"Be sure that old dead pine doesn't beat you to the draw!" he yelled back.

It was cold outside, but there wasn't much wind. I saw the dead pine, and headed for it.

Night comes on slowly in the north, but it comes early east of the Kjölen. Those mountains make for a high horizon.

Sven had, indeed, used that pine for target practice; he'd painted a six-inch white circle on it. I went up to the pine, then turned to pace off twenty-five yards.

I was at twenty paces when the wind hit.

I don't know how to describe what happened. It was like a wind, and yet it wasn't. It was as if everything whirled around, and *then* the wind came.

And I was in the middle of the goddamdest blizzard I had seen since the time I nearly froze to death in Nebraska.

I stood still. Only a damn fool wanders around when he can't see where he's going. I knew I was only fifty yards from Sten's lodge, and I trusted the insulated clothing I was wearing. I wouldn't freeze, and I could wait out the storm until I got my bearings.

I put out my arms and turned slowly. My right hand touched a tree. I hadn't remembered a tree that near, but it gave me an anchor. I stepped over and stood the leeward side of it, away from the wind.

In those two steps, I noticed something impossible to believe.

The snow around my ankles was four inches deep.

There had been no snow on the ground when I started out.

And I don't believe there has ever been a storm which could deposit four inches of snow in less than two seconds.

I just stood there, wondering what the hell had happened. I couldn't see more than a couple of yards in front of me, and the dim light didn't help much. I waited. The howling of that sudden wind was far too loud for my voice to be heard over fifty yards. Sten would never hear me.

But he would know I was out in this mess, and he would know I would keep my head. I could wait. For a while, at least.

I looked at my watch to check the time. Very good. Then I leaned back against the relatively warm tree to wait.

My hands began to get cold. I stripped off the shooting gloves and put on the one-finger mittens. Better.

As sometimes happens in a snowstorm, the wind died down abruptly. It became a gentle breeze. Overhead, the clouds had cleared, and there came almost a dead calm as the last few snowflakes drifted down. My watch told me it had been twenty-seven minutes since the storm had started.

The sun glittered off the fresh snow.

The sun?

By now, it should have been close to the peaks of the Kjölen. It wasn't. It was almost overhead.

I looked carefully around. I should have been able to see the dead pine, and I certainly should have been able to see Sten's lodge.

I could see neither. Around me was nothing but forest.

Only the distant crest of the Kjölen looked the same.

The whole thing was impossible, and I knew it. I also knew that I was seeing what I was seeing.

My mother, bless her, had told me stories when I was a kid—old Irish stories about the Folk of Faerie and the Hollow Hills.

"If you're invited beneath a Hollow Hill by the Faerie Folk, don't ever touch a drop of their drink or a bite of their food, or when you come out after the night, a hundred years will have passed."

Throw out that hypothesis. I hadn't been invited beneath any Hollow Hill, much less taken a drink or eaten a bite.

Unless Sten—

Oh, hell, no! That was silly.

But certainly something had gone wrong with time. Or with my mind. The sun was in the wrong place.

If you can't trust your own mind, what can you trust? As old Whatsisname—Descartes—said: *Cogito ergo sum.*

I think; therefore, I am.

I decided, therefore, that not only I was, but I was sane.

I had read about cryogenic experiments. Theoretically, if an organism is frozen properly, it can stay in a state of suspended animation for an indefinite time. Suppose that had happened to me. Suppose a sudden blizzard had frozen me stiff, and I had thawed out years later, without realizing that time had passed.

It didn't seem likely. Surely I would have been found by Sten. Or, if not, I'd have waked up flat on my back instead of standing up. No. Not likely.

But I decided to check it out. It would take a long time for Sten's lodge to deteriorate to the point where there were no traces left.

I walked over to where the lodge should have been, trudging through the ankle-deep snow. I'm a pretty good judge of distance and direction, and I checked the whole area where the lodge should have been.

Nothing. Pine needles under the snow; nothing under the pine needles but dirt. Nothing.

There was an old, broken tree stump about where Sten's living room should have been. I brushed the snow off it and sat down.

I don't think I thought for several minutes. Then I noticed that I was beginning to get a little chilled. Get some exercise and build a fire. I went out and gathered what broken bits of pine branches I could find, and built a small campfire near the stump. No rubbing two sticks together; my butane lighter still worked.

I sat there for an hour in a pale blue funk, wondering what had happened.

I know it was an hour, because I looked at my watch again. That was when I heard a quiet noise behind me.

I jerked my head around and looked. My hand went to my right hip. But I didn't draw.

Standing not ten paces from me were seven men.

They were quiet and unmoving, like frozen statues except for their eyes, which regarded me with interest, curiosity, and caution.

They were heavily clad in dark furs, like Eskimos wearing black bearskins. Each one carried a long spear and a roundshield.

They weren't Eskimos. Eskimos don't have blue eyes and blond hair. Those blue eyes regarded me with suspicion.

I lifted my hands carefully, showing them empty. I couldn't figure out the spears, but I didn't want to get in a hassle with the locals.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," I said in Swedish. I kept my voice low and controlled. "Would you care to share the fire with me?"

There was a pause while all of them looked blank. Then one of them stepped forward and said something in an equally low and controlled voice. I couldn't understand a word of it.

Still, it sounded damned familiar.

I can speak—besides English—Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Danish very well. I speak German with a weird accent, but I can make myself understood easily. Afrikaans is a language I can almost understand, but not quite. This was like that.

"I don't understand," I said.

The man who had stepped out—obviously the leader—turned and said something to the man next to him. The second man answered. Their voices were low and so soft I couldn't get the drift. I figured the second man was second in command.

The leader turned to me again and spoke in a louder voice, very slowly, syllable by syllable.

It took me a few seconds to get it.

I don't know if I can explain it to you. Look; suppose you were in that same situation, and some fur-clad character had come up to you and said: "*hwahn-thah-tah-preelah-wee-thiz-show-rez-so-tah-theh-drocht-ahv-mahrch-ath-peersed-tow-theh-row-tah . . .*"

You might feel a little left out of it, right?

Then, suddenly, it comes to you that what he is doing is too-carefully pronouncing Chaucer's "*Whan that Aprille with his shou'res soote*! *The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote . . .*"

And then you have to translate that into modern English as: "When April, with his showers sweet, the drought of March has pierced to the root . . ."

It was like that to me. I got it, partly, but it was older than any Northman's tongue I had ever heard. It was more inflected and had more syllables per word than any I knew. It made Icelandic seem modern.

What he had said was: "You say you do not understand?"

I tried to copy his usage and inflection. It came out something like: "Yah. Me no understand."

I won't try to give you any more of my linguistic troubles. I'll just say that the conversation took a little longer than it should have.

"You must understand a little," he said.

"Yah. A little. Not well. I am sorry."

"Who are you, and what do you do here?"

"I called Theodore." But I pronounced it "Taydor".

"What do you do here?" he repeated. Those spears weren't pointed at me, but they were at the ready. I didn't like the looks of the chipped flint points.

"I lost," I said. "I have hunger and suffer from cold."

"Where do you come from?"

"America. Across the western sea."

They looked at each other. Then the leader looked back at me. "You are alone?"

"I am alone." It was a dangerous admission to make. A lone man is easier prey than one who has friends. But I figured a bluff of having friends around wouldn't work, and I didn't want to be caught out as a liar right off the bat. Besides, if worse came to worst, I figured I could gun the seven of them down before they could touch me. But I didn't want to do that. Not unless they attacked me without provocation.

The spears remained at the ready, but the men seemed to relax a little.

"What is your station?" the leader asked.

It took me a second. He was asking my rank in life. Was I a thrall or a freeman or a noble?

"I am a freeman and a warrior," I answered honestly. The time I'd spent in the service ought to count for something. "But I have, as you see, no spear and no shield."

"Then how do we know you are a warrior? How did you lose your spear and shield?"

"I did not lose them. I have come in peace."

That flabbergasted them. There was a lot of low talk among them. I sat quietly.

I was taking the tide as it ran. I still had no idea of what had happened to me, but I was damned if I'd be a stupid tourist in someone else's country.

Finally, the leader said: "Tay'or, you will come with us. We will give you food and drink and we will talk over your oddness."

"I will come," I said. I stood up.

They gripped their spears more tightly, and their eyes widened.

I knew why. It was something none of us had realized while I was seated. I was bigger than any of them. Not a one of them was taller than Sten Örmfeld. But they looked just as tough.

I folded my hands on my chest. "I go where you lead."

They didn't all lead. The head cheese and his lieutenant went ahead; the other five were behind me, spears still at the ready.

It was about twenty minutes' walk, which made sense. The fire I had started had attracted their attention, and the wisp of smoke had led them to me. It had just taken them a little time to decide to investigate.

We ended up at a collection of log cabins. I was marched straight to the largest one and led inside, past a curtain of bearskin. I had to duck my head to get through the doorway. Just inside, the leader stopped and said: "You are in the mead-hall of Vigalaf Wolfslayer. Conduct yourself accordingly."

There was a fire in the middle of the earth-floored room, just below a hole in the roof which was supposed to let the smoke out. Maybe eighty percent of it went out, but the other twenty percent filled the air. Underneath the smell of pine smoke was an odor of rancid fat and cooked meat.

By the fire stood a man with a great gray-blond beard, and long hair to match. He was a giant of a man, compared to the others; he must have stood a full five-eight.



I took him to be Vigalaf Wolfslayer, and, as it turned out, I was right. He said two words: "Explain, Hrotokar."

Hrotokar was the leader of the squad who'd found me. He told his story straight, emphasizing the fact that I had given no trouble.

Vigalaf looked at me for the first time. "Doff your hood in my presence, Giant Tay'or," he said—not arrogantly, but merely as a statement of his due. I peeled back the hood of my parka.

"Truly, not one of *Them*, then," he said. "The Eaters-of-Men have no such hair, nor such eyes. Are you truly one of us, Giant?"

"A distant relative, Vigalaf Wolfslayer," I said. I thought I was telling the truth, but God knows how distant the relationship was.

"You will call me Father Wolfslayer," he said. Again, no arrogance—just his due.

"I ask pardon, Father Wolfslayer," I said. "I am not familiar with your customs. Forgive me if I err."

He nodded and eased himself down on a pile of furs near the fire. "Sit," he said.

I sat. My escort did not. Evidently, they knew his order had not been addressed to them. There were no furs for me, so I planted my rump on the bare earth of the floor, crossing my legs.

"Bring him mead," he said.

By this time, my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom in the windowless mead-hall. I saw that there were other people back in the dark corners, all wearing furs. In spite of the fire, there was still a chill; most of the heat was going out the roof hole.

From one dark corner, there was a gurgling noise. Then a figure stepped forward, bearing a horn of mead. I mean it. An honest-to-God cow's horn, ten inches long, full of liquid.

I've done a lot of drinking in a lot of places, but the one drink I'd never tried until that moment was mead. I knew it was made from honey, so I had, somewhere in the back of my mind, the notion that it was sweet, like port or sweet sherry.

No such thing. This stuff tasted like flat beer. It had a certain amount of authority, however.

Before I drank, I thought I ought to say something. I lifted the horn and said: "I thank you for your hospitality, Father Wolfslayer." I drank.

It was evidently the right thing to say. I saw his beard and mustache curl in a smile. "Truly," he said again, "not one of *Them*."

I took the bit in my teeth. "Forgive my ignorance, Father Wolfslayer, but you speak of *Them*. Who are *They*?"

His shaggy gray eyebrows lifted. "You know not?

Truly, you are from afar. *They* are the demons, the Evil Ones, the Eaters-of-Men. *They* are from the Far North, and they come to slay and to eat. *They* speak as do animals. *They* are Giants!" He paused. "Not so great as you, but Giants, nonetheless." Another pause. "And they wear frost about them instead of furs, as decent folk do."

I couldn't make any sense out of that, but I filed it away for later reference.

"I know nothing of them, Father Wolfslayer," I said. "They are certainly no friends nor kin of mine."

An enemy of these people, obviously. But the "demon" bit, and the "evil" and the "eaters-of-men" I figured as just so much propaganda.

"You speak well, Giant Tay'or," Vigalaf said. He raised a hand. "Bring him food."

The same person came out from the shadows, bearing a wooden bowl in one hand. This time, I looked more closely at who was serving me.

Me, I wear a beard. It's as red as the rest of my hair. I think shaving is a bore. The rest of the men there wore beards, too. My server was either a beardless boy or a woman. A people who use flint points on their spears find shaving more than a bore; they find it impossible. Besides, the lines around her eyes showed more character than a kid ever had. With those heavy furs on, it was hard to tell anything about her figure, but my instincts told me, more than anything else, that this was no teenage lad.

The glint in her eyes as they met mine confirmed my assessment of the situation. There was a slight smile on her lips as she handed me the bowl.

I automatically took it with my right hand. Then she held over her closed left hand toward mine. I opened my left hand, palm up. She dropped three nuts into it and turned away, going back to her dark corner.

I just sat there for a few seconds. The bowl contained some sort of porridge with a few chunks of meat in it. But there were no utensils to eat it with. And what about those nuts in my other hand?

I could feel every eye in the place on me. This was a test of some kind, but I didn't know what. What the hell should I do next?

Think, Sorenson! Think!

The mead-hall was utterly silent except for the crackling of the fire.

I don't know what sort of logic I used. All I knew was that if I failed this test I had better have my right hand free.

I closed my left hand on the nuts, put the bowl in my lap, and said: "Thank you again, Father Wolfslayer."

There was no answer. Carefully, I began to pick up the lumpy porridge with the thumb and first two fingers of my right hand, conveying the stuff to my mouth. No reaction from the audience. I ate it all. Then I put the bowl on the ground near me. Still no reaction.

It was those damn three nuts, then.

What was a supposed to do with them? Eat them? Give them back? Shove them up my nose? What?

I opened my hand slowly and looked at them. They were some kind of walnut, I guessed, but the shell on them

was a lot thicker and harder than the walnuts I was used to.

I wiped my right hand off on my pantsleg. I didn't want a slick hand if I had to grab for my gun. Then I lifted my head slowly and looked at the Wolfslayer, holding his eyes.

He nodded silently and gestured with one hand.

The broad-shouldered blonde woman brought me a flat rock, laying it on the ground in front of me before she retreated to her corner.

I got it then. Every man in the place—and the woman, too—carried a little stone-headed mallet cinched at the waist.

Well, what the hell. A chance is a chance.

Frank Pachmeyer will supply you, if you want them, with magazines that have a quarter-inch of rubber on the bottom, which, according to some, makes it easier to slam the magazine home on the reload. I never cared for them. Mine are steel on the bottom—no rubber. A personal idiosyncrasy.

At that moment, I thanked God for my idiosyncrasy.

I put the three walnuts on the flat rock, and drew my weapon.

A gun should never be used that way. But, then, a gun should never be used in any way unless there's need for it. It saved my life that time. I took it out, grabbed it near the muzzle, and carefully cracked nuts with the butt.

Call it instinct, call it intuition, call it what you will. It was the right thing to do. I found out later that the terrible Eaters-of-Men carried large stone axes, but not small ones. If they ever ate nuts, they cracked them by grabbing the nearest rock and slamming them. No delicacy.

The nuts, by the way, were very bitter.

As I ate the last one, there was a deep sigh that sounded all through the mead-hall. Wolfslayer said: "Giant Tay'or, will you be our guest?"

Searching back in my memory for what little I knew about the ancient history of the Northmen, I said: "I have no guest-gift for my host, Father Wolfslayer."

"Your guest-gift will be your strength, if you will give it. Will you fight against *Them* when the Demons come again?"

That was a tough one. I only knew one side of the quarrel. But, what the hell, a man who can't choose sides, even if he's wrong, isn't worth a damn. "I have no spear or shield, Father Wolfslayer," I said. And realized I was hedging.

"They will be provided."

"Then I will fight for you."

"Then you are my guest!" Suddenly, he came out with a barrel-roll laugh. "Mead! Mead for all! Come, Giant, sit by me! Here is a skin!"

The party began.

After about the fourth horn of mead, the Wolfslayer leaned over and said: "Where did you come by such a strange mallet?"

"It was made by a friend in a distant country," I said. "It was made for my hands alone." I didn't want the old boy to ask to handle my Colt.

His bushy eyebrows went up again. "Of course. Are not

all such, in all places?"

"Of course, Father Wolfslayer." More information. The nutcrackers were personal gear. Fine.

That night, I slept under a bearskin, still wearing my insulated outdoor clothing. I hadn't bathed, but nobody else around there had, either. You could tell.

When I woke up, I was sweating, but my nose was cold. Around me, I could hear thunderous snores, but somebody was moving around, too. I opened one eye a crack. I should have known. The men were still sleeping; the women were preparing breakfast. Women's lib had evidently not reached these people. Which reminded me—

Just who the hell were these people?

I was sleeping on my left side (A holstered .45 makes a very lumpy mattress), with my right hand on the butt of my pistol. I kept my eyes closed and checked for hangover. Nope. Whoever their brewmaster was, he made a good brew.

This was the first opportunity that I had had to really think since the squad of seven had found me in the forest. Since then, I had merely been doing my best to stay alive.

I realized that I had accepted one thing: Like Twain's Connecticut Yankee or de Camp's Martin Padway, I had slipped back in time. How far? I didn't know. I still don't. I probably never will. These people weren't Christians, by a long shot, and they'd never heard of Him; I'd got that much in my conversations the previous night.

They'd never heard of Rome, either, but that didn't mean anything. There were a lot of things they might not have heard of, way up here. Like Egypt.

Still, I think I must have been at least fifteen hundred years in my own past, and probably more. Their use of stone instead of metal certainly argued for great antiquity, and they didn't act at all like the bloodthirsty Vikings history records so vividly.

They were a hunting-and-gathering culture, with emphasis on hunting in the winter. Bear seemed to be their big game during the cold months. A hibernating bear, if you can find one, is fairly easy to kill if you can get it before it wakes up. The meat is good, and the skins are useful.

Snores were changing to snorts and snuffles; the men were waking up. I sat up and yawned prodigiously. Almost immediately, the broad-shouldered blonde of the night before was kneeling in front of me with a wooden bowl full of meat chunks and a horn of warm mead. She was really smiling this time, showing teeth. I noticed that the left upper lateral incisor was crooked. Charming. If only she'd had a bath.

"What's your name?" I asked, after thanking her for the food. As I said, I won't go into my linguistic difficulties. She didn't understand me at first, and we had to work it out.

"*Brahenagenunda Vigalaf Wolfslayer's Daughter,*" she told me. "But you should not thank me for the food; you should thank Father Wolfslayer, for the food is his."

"I shall thank him for the food," I said. "I am thanking you for the preparing of it." After all, if she was the Wolfslayer's daughter, I was talking to a princess.

She blushed. "Excuse me. I must serve the others."

It occurred to me then that since everyone addressed the old man as "Father" maybe everyone called themselves his sons and daughters, whether they were biologically his children or not. I found out later that only his true children took the Wolfslayer's name. Brahenagenunda was his daughter, all right.

I saw a couple of the men going out, and I had a hunch I knew where they were going, so I followed them. I was right; they headed for the woods. When I returned, I felt much more comfortable. Snow is a poor substitute for toilet tissue, but it's better than nothing.

The cold was not too bitter. About minus two Celsius, I figured. The people from the other, smaller log cabins were going about their business, their breath, like mine, making white plumes in the air, as if everyone were puffing cigarettes. I was glad I'd never had the habit of smoking; I had the feeling tobacco would be hard to come by here-and-now.

Squad Leader Hrotokar was waiting for me just outside Vigalaf's mead-hall. "Hail, Tay'or."

"Hail, Hrotokar."

"We go to seek the bear, my men and I. Will you come?" Another test, I decided. "I will come."

"There is spear and shield for you." Then he looked me over and became less formal. "Are you sure those funny clothes you're wearing will keep you warm enough?"

"They'll be fine," I assured him. I wasn't going to tell him that they were probably far better than the stuff he was wearing.

"Well, they'll have to do, I guess," he said. "I've got an extra jacket and trousers, but I doubt they'd fit."

"I think you're right. How do we go about this bear hunt?"

Primarily, it turned out, what we did was look for tiny wisps of vapor coming out of a crack in the snow. It indicated that a bear was holed away underneath, breathing slowly and shallowly in hibernation. Then we checked to see if the bear was a female with cubs. We only killed males.

I won't bother telling about that day's hunt, because that's all we did—hunt. Didn't find a damned thing. But Hrotokar and I got to know each other pretty well. Unlike most hunts, we could talk; there's not much danger of waking up a hibernating bear.

The thing was, I wasn't able to get in any practice with spear and shield that day. There's a Greek friend of mine in San José who is a nut on spear-and-shield work in the manner of the ancient Greek *hoplites*. He and a bunch of his buddies worked out the technique, and practiced it, using blunt, padded spears. I practiced with them, and got pretty good at it, but trying it for real is very different indeed. I've had lots of practice with bayonet-and-rifle, too, but I've never had to use it in combat. Or against a bear, even a sleeping one.

The sun shone most of the day, but the clouds came in in the afternoon, and it was snowing again by the time we reached the settlement.

We came in empty-handed, and so did all of the other squads but one. They had a bear, which caused great rejoicing and happiness throughout the community. (I never

actually counted them, but I'd estimate there were between fifty-five and sixty people in the whole settlement.) One of the other squads had seen a deer, but that was the one that got away.

During the winter, most of the gathering done by the women is for firewood. Fallen branches, twigs, anything that will burn. If they find an occasional dead tree, or one that has fallen over, they mark the spot and tell the men about it. Then both sexes form a work party to bring it in.

I was not the guest of honor that night in the mead-hall. A guy named Worfitergen, who had killed the bear, got all the kudos—which he deserved. Father Wolfslayer stood up and made a speech about his bravery and prowess, and then a little guy with a limp—a bard, I guess—made up a chant about Worfitergen that made it sound as if he'd slain a two-ton Kodiak all by himself.

Then Father Wolfslayer shouted: "Mead! Bring mead!"

A woman came from the shadows and brought Worfitergen his horn of mead, but it wasn't Brahenagenunda. This one was older and a good deal more worn looking.

Another woman, even older, came out and whispered into Vigalaf Wolfslayer's ear. He scowled.

There was tension in the air; I could tell that. The mead for the hero was supposed to be served by the Wolfslayer's youngest and prettiest daughter, and that hadn't been done.

Technically, Worfitergen had been given a social put-down.

Vigalaf Wolfslayer rose with majestic dignity. "Worfitergen Hero," he said, looking at the hunter, who was still holding his mead-horn untasted, "neither I nor my women meant insult here. I have just been told that Vigalaf's Daughter Brahenagenunda has not returned from her wood-gathering. The sun has gone to his rest, and the blizzard is over all." He turned to the little guy with the limp. "Make us a prayer to the All-Father, Song Chant."

He made us a prayer. I didn't understand a word of it; it was in a language even older than the one they spoke. But it had a solemnity and dignity that made it a prayer.

One thing. I almost got caught out. I started to bow my head, but I saw what the others were doing in time, and looked upward, out the smoke-hole, toward the sky. I guess they believed in looking God in the face when they talked to Him.

When it was over, the Wolfslayer said: "It is her Wyrd. We shall look for her in the morning."

He was right, of course. I wanted to charge out right then and start searching, but in a blizzard, without lights, it would have been senseless. He—and we—had done all that was possible for the time being.

Wolfslayer lifted his mead horn. "Now, Worfitergen Hero, to your honor."

And the party was on again.

It may seem heartless, the way they behaved. Here was a woman—girl, really; she was only sixteen—out in the dark and the freezing cold, alone and without help, while her friends and relatives were having a merry time and getting all boozed up. But these were a practical people. When nothing can be done, do something else. She couldn't be rescued yet, so get on with the original

schedule. When the time came, things would be done.

In the morning, the sky was clear again. The squads went out, this time both hunting and searching. Deer, bear, or dear Brahenagenunda, whatever we could find.

We found nothing. The snow had covered everything. It was six inches deep on the level, and deeper in the drifts. She might have been lying under the snow somewhere, but you can't search every snowdrift.

There was no party in the mead-hall that evening. Neither game nor maid had been found. It was a gloomy night. I slept only because I was exhausted.

The next morning, I went out again with Hrotokar's squad. The gloom was still with us. We didn't talk much.

It was about noon when we came across the Death Sign. That's what Hrotokar called it.

"The Demons," he said very softly. "*They* are here."

I saw what he was pointing at. It was a human skull—the upper part, with the jawbone missing—impalemented on a stake about thirty yards away.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"War," he said simply. "*They*, too, want the bear and the deer. *They* come from the North, with their clothing of frost. This is our hunting country, but *They* want to take it from us. Drive us away or kill us. Come, let us see."

He gave orders to the rest of the squad to be on the lookout, in case this was a trap of some kind. We went up to the Death Sign without seeing or hearing any living thing around.

The skull was a fresh one. There were still shreds of boiled flesh clinging to parts of it. The stake had been thrust through the opening where the spinal column had been. Footprints led to and from the grisly thing. It had been put there sometime that morning.

Hrotokar said in a low grating voice: "All-Father curse them. A man's skull they would have kept to drink from."

Then I saw the crooked left upper lateral incisor.

I know, now, what the word *berserker* means. A red haze of absolute hatred came over me. If there had been anyone to vent that hatred against, I damn well would have done it. I don't know how long that red haze lasted. It seemed eternal from inside, but the others were still standing in the same positions when I came out of it, so it couldn't have been too long.

I had not lost the hatred; it had merely become cold and calculating instead of hot and wild. "Hrotokar," I said calmly, "what do we do next?"

"We must tell the Wolfslayer," he said. From the sound of his voice, I could tell that the same cold hatred had come over him.

"And what will he do?"

"All the fighting men will follow these tracks until we find the Eaters-of-Men, and then we will slay them." He turned to one of the men. "Fleet-of-Foot, go and—"

"Hold, Hrotokar Squad-Leader," I said carefully. "This is a trap." Don't ask me how I knew; I just knew. "If Father Wolfslayer sends all the fighting men, that will leave the settlement unguarded. That is what *They* want us to do. Then, while we are following the trail, *They* will go to the settlement and butcher the women, the children, and the old ones."

He frowned. "That very well may be, Tay'or. What, then, should we do?"

"How many of the Eaters-of-Men are there?" I asked.

"Half again as many as we have in the settlement. Maybe more. Perhaps we cannot win." He shrugged. "We must try."

"We can win. Do you trust me, Hrotokar?"

He looked at me for a long moment. "I trust you, Giant Fire-Hair."

"Good. Now, here's what you do: Send Fleet-of-Foot to warn Father Wolfslayer. But Father Wolfslayer is not to send more than another squad to us. The rest should stay at the settlement to hold off the Demons. Meanwhile, we and the new squad will loop around and come upon the Demons from behind. Do you understand?"

A wolfish grin came over his face, and he nodded. "I see. It shall be done."

It took an hour for the second squad to arrive. Then we started following the tracks. But not too far. Only one of the Demons had been needed to place that skull where it would be found, and it was his job to lead us off. As soon as the tracks in the snow began leading off in the wrong direction, Hrotokar and I led the men around in an arc, back toward the settlement.

Sure enough, the place was under siege.

The besiegers had the place surrounded. Hrotokar had been underestimating when he said that there were half again as many of the invaders as there were of Father Wolfslayer's people. There were over fifty males of the Demons surrounding the log cabins. That meant that their total numbers probably exceeded a hundred.

The Demons were human, of course. There was nothing supernatural about them. They came from the far east of Asia, I think. They were big, about six feet tall, and their faces were definitely Oriental. Mongols? Huns? I don't know. You name it, and you can have it. You wouldn't want it.

They weren't Eskimos; I knew that. But they wore "frost." Polar bear skins. White, you see. And they came from the North.

That makes sense, too. Look at a map of northern Europe. In order to get down into southern Sweden, they'd have to come from the North. From the East, they'd have had to come up through Finland and down south again.

Whoever they were, I did not like them.

They were closing in on the settlement when I and the fourteen men with me came up behind them.

"Do we attack now, Fire-Hair?" Hrotokar asked softly. I don't know why, but he had evidently decided to give the leadership to me. He didn't sound very confident—after all, fifteen men against fifty?—but for some reason he trusted me.

"Friend," I asked gently, "how many of those could you kill in a charge?"

His eyes narrowed as he looked at me. "We come from behind. At least fifteen. Perhaps thirty."

"Good. Kill me fifteen, and the rest I shall take care of."

I only had fifty rounds of ammo, and in a firefight you can't be sure every shot will count.

His eyes widened. "Do you swear?"

"I swear by the All-Father and by my life," I said.

"Go, Friend Hrotokar. Kill the cannibal sons-of-bitches!" And I added: "When you go, scream like furies! I will be with you every hand of the way."

And I was.

When the two squads charged in, screaming war cries, I was with them. The Demons heard us and turned.

They came at us, spears at the ready. When there was twenty yards between the two opposing ranks, I tossed away my spear and shield, dropped to one knee, and drew my pistol.

The thunder of that weapon echoed across the snowfield as I placed each shot. I think my own men hesitated when they heard that noise, but they charged on when they saw it was me doing the damage.

They didn't know what to make of it, but they saw the Demons, the Eaters-of-Men, fall one after another, and they knew I was doing my part, as I had promised.

Forty-five caliber hardball slugs from service ammo does more damage to living flesh than any other handgun ammo in existence. A man hit solidly with one of those bullets goes down and stays down.

I fired as if I were firing at pop-up targets, except that there was no "friend-or-foe." If it was wearing a polar-bear suit, it was a foe.

The cold hatred for these horrors burned in my brain. They were targets, nothing more. They were things to be shot down and obliterated. When one magazine was empty, I put in another without even thinking about it.

I still had half a magazine left when the fighting was over.

Forty-four of the no-good sons-of-bitches had fallen to me. Hrotokar and his squads had taken care of the rest.

I sat there on the ground, exhausted. Killing is not fun; it is horrible. It is something you must do to preserve your own life, or that of your loved ones.

I don't know how long I sat there, with my pistol in my hand, but the next thing I knew, there was someone towering above me.

"Giant Tay'or Fire-Hair," he began. Then he stopped.

I looked up. It was Father Wolfslayer. He looked rather frightened. He cleared his throat.

I stood up to face him. I still couldn't talk.

All of them backed away from me—not in fear, but in reverence. I didn't like that.

"We know you now for what you are," the Wolfslayer continued. "We will—"

And then something cut him off. The world spun again.

Ulglossen, having finished the experiments necessary, prepared to return to—

But wait! In the twenty-first decimal, there was an aberration. Some life-form had been dragged from its proper space-time. Poor thing. On the way back, Ulglossen would return the life-form to its proper era. More or less. After all, one should be kind, but one need not be overly solicitous toward life-forms of the past. Still, Ulglossen was a kindly being.

There was no snow on the ground. I was alone in the forest.

Before me was the dead pine that Sten Örfeld had drawn a target on.

I turned. There was Sten's lodge, fifty yards away.

I went toward it. It didn't fade or go away. It was solid, as it should be. Somehow, some way, I was back in my own time.

I walked to the door. I think it took me at least two minutes to decide to open it.

"Sten?" I said.

"Yah? What do you want? I thought you were going out to shoot."

"Changed my mind," I said. "I'm short of ammo."

"Dumbbell," he said kindly. "Sit down and relax. We'll have a drink together when I'm finished."

"Sure, Sten; sure," I said. I sat down on the couch.

I think I know what happened. I remember hearing Hrotokar in the background saying: "His hammer smashed them! Killed them! And then came back to his hand!"

I can see how that illusion could come about. I hold the hammer in my hand and there is a thunderbolt and the foe falls dead—his head smashed in. And then the hammer is back in my hand. Sure.

Those folk had already shortened my name from "Teydor" to "Tey'or"; why not one syllable further?

My weapon has a name now, as Sten suggested. I looked up a man who knows Norse runes, and I had another man engrave those runes on my pistol, on the right, just above the trigger.

The engraving says: *Mjolnir*.

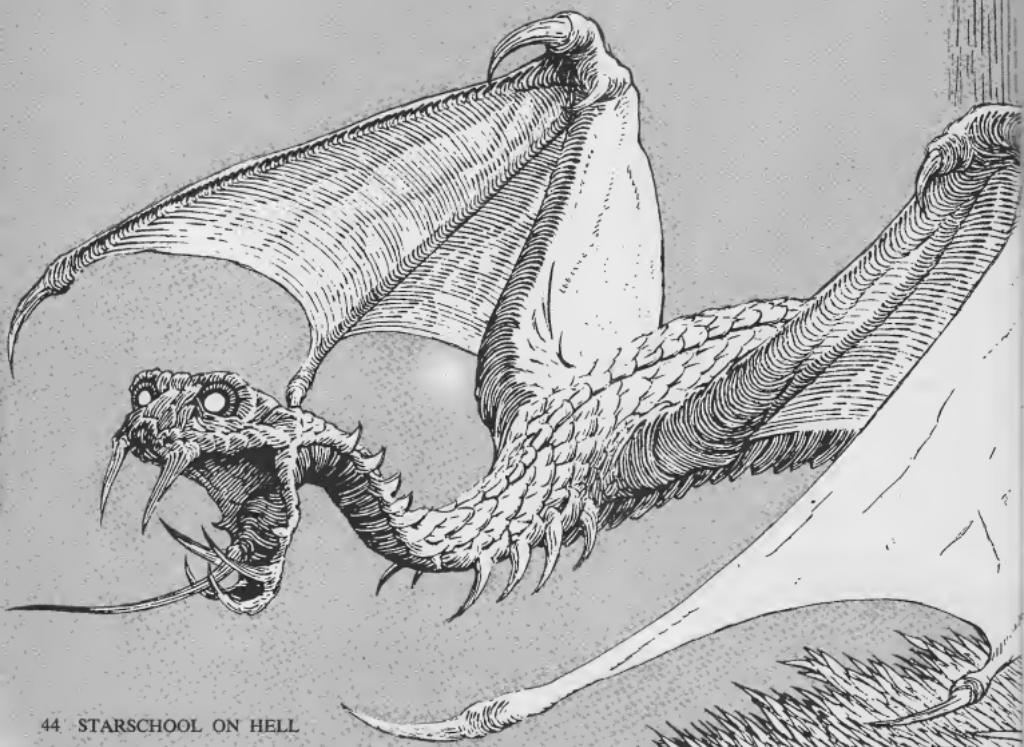
Yah.

The original.



STARSCCHOOL ON HELL

Joe Haldeman and Jack G. Haldeman II
Illustrated by George Barr





My knees finally buckled and I fell to the sand, hard. I was dizzy, thirsty. My skin felt like dried parchment. I would have given everything I owned for a glass of water.

They had told us how tough Hell would be and I hadn't believed them. I did now.

I tried to wipe the sand out of my mouth and rolled over on my back. That was a mistake. The sun nearly blinded me. The pain in my side wouldn't go away. I couldn't seem to get much air and what I got was hot and dry.

A face blotted out the sun for a moment; a weathered, wrinkled face improved by puckered scars. It loomed over me, drew closer. The face was about ten centimeters from my nose and its breath settled on me like a poisonous fog.

"Shize, Springer," he shouted. "Can't you do no better than that? You lying there like an old lady. Get your butt off the sand and move those legs. Now! Move 'em."

I wanted to say that I'd had enough, that I was finished, that I felt like I was dying. It wouldn't have helped. That voice wouldn't stop until I moved. I hated the voice and the knuckle-dragging cretin that belonged to it; we all did. Bruno Santino, our drill instructor, who tried to push everyone to the breaking point, then beyond. I think he rode me harder than the others. Probably because I was so much larger than he was.

The only way I could get him to shut up was to move. I pulled myself to my knees. It hurt, everywhere.

"That's it, Springer. We'll make a soldier out of you yet." He turned abruptly, to harass another student. I never wanted to be a soldier. I was just a university student. He seemed to forget that.

Somehow, I managed to get to my feet. In the distance I could see the glinting black solar panels on the barrack roofs. The buildings were mostly underground, only the tops poked above the sand and scrub brush. Some of the students had already reached the barracks. They hadn't had as far to go as I did. Some brilliant mind had scaled the maneuvers this morning so that the largest had the longest trek. I could make a case for it being the other way around.

I put one foot out. It held. I tried another and slowly lurched across the desert.

Of course nobody had promised us that Hell would be easy. It had been the most unpleasant world in the Confederación, until Springworld was colonized. Now I figure it's a tossup, though Hell might just have an edge. Sometimes when I'm all tired and beat, I almost feel like I was back at home harvesting the volmer.

I come from Springworld, which is why I'm as big as I am. We lead a rough life there, so when it was colonized the Confederación's scientists tweaked a few genes and made us large and strong. Those who survived grew even larger and stronger. I'm an eighth-generation Springer and proud of it; maybe too proud.

I found out the hard way that being large can have its drawbacks when I'm off-planet. I'd never been off Springworld before and probably never would have made it if I hadn't gotten a scholarship on *Starschool*. Universidad

de los astros—*Starschool*—a university that travels to the stars. I was getting a first-class education, sometimes through excellent instructors, sometimes the hard way—like now. Because of my build I stand out like a weed in a bed of low plants. I'm almost a meter taller and a good hundred kilos heavier than most of the Hellers. I have the feeling they resent it. They sure seem to be going out of their way to make my stay here as difficult as possible.

Hell has only one important industry: training people for violence by tempering them to violence. Just about everything that moves on this rotten planet can kill you, including the Hellers. Maybe especially the Hellers. Planets that are serious about war send their future military leaders here to learn their trade. They either learn it or they die. That's the hard course.

There's another course for important people like princes. Under controlled conditions they learn how to kill without being killed. If they fail they don't die, they just flunk out. They might lose face, and maybe a limb or two, but they live. Come out pretty tough, too. This is called the *easy* course.

Naturally, there's a third course for people like us—students and visitors who just want to get a taste of what goes on during the training process on Hell. This is called the soft course. They rolled us out of bed at 0300 this morning, and we've been going full tilt for sixteen hours. Somebody named Bruno keeps yelling in my face that he wants to make me a soldier. I'd yank his arm off if I had any strength left. *Soft course!*

When I finally got to the barracks, I headed straight for my bunk. It felt like it was made out of bricks and was at least a meter too short. For the first time, I didn't complain. I stretched out on top of the sheets and was asleep before my head hit the pillow. I could have slept ten years; it felt like ten minutes.

"Wake up, Carl," said a familiar voice, far away. "Only a half hour till chow." I opened one eye. My mouth felt like a carrion bird had been nesting in it. The sand between my teeth made interesting sounds.

Gradually the person on the adjoining bunk came into focus. Short and black-haired. Francisco Bolivar. Pancho. Native of the planet Selva and a classmate on the tour; my best friend.

"Gonna skip chow," I moaned. "Sleep. That's what I need. Lots of sleep."

"You need food, amigo," said Pancho, reaching over and shaking my arm. "Your body needs fuel."

What my body needed was a picket sign: On Strike. Every muscle was howling in protest of the last week of punishment.

"Let me think about it," I said, closing my open eye.

A harsh voice cut through the barracks. "Ah, the baby from Springworld, he needs his beauty sleep."

Damn Bruno. Even knowing we were *supposed* to hate him didn't help any. Somehow I managed to sit up, get both eyes open this time.

"I was just going to shower up and get something to eat," I said. There was no rule against sleeping during meals, but it was considered a sign of slacking off and slackers got pretty rough treatment. I didn't need any more of that.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, my eyes came about even with Bruno's. He was pretty tall for a Heller, but I still had an easy 3/4 of a meter on him as well as being some 80 kilos heavier. All other things being equal, though, I wouldn't want to tangle with him in earnest. Hellers were built tough. I swallowed all the things I really wanted to say about the species of his parents. Instead, I turned to Pancho.

"About that shower, amigo. You ready?"

Pancho grabbed two towels, tossed me one. "Let's go," he said.

The showers had two settings; cold and colder. The recycled water had a foul, musty smell; something that the water on board *Starschool* didn't. Were their recyclers inefficient or was it that way on purpose? They did a lot of obnoxious things on Hell to "build character."

The mess hall was noisy and crowded in spite of the fact that we were late. Balancing my tray, I looked over the room and saw a couple of empty seats. I plowed my way towards them and Pancho followed along in my wake. We sat down at a table with three other students—B'oosa, a tall, black man from Nurodesia; Alegria, a short, attractive girl from Selva; and Miko Riley. The less said about him, the better.

"Did you boys enjoy our little invigorating hike this morning?" B'oosa asked as I set down my tray.

"You've got to be kidding," I said. "Up at 0300 hours and I pulled late watch last night. Calisthenics till sunup. Doubletime over the sand for thirty kilometers. Seemed more like a death march to me."

B'oosa laughed, an easy laugh, smooth as glass. "The desert reminds me of home," he said. "It was good to get out and stretch my legs. Even a ship as large as *Starschool* feels cramped after a while."

B'oosa is the second largest student on the tour, a little shorter than me and about 65 kilos lighter. He'd gone the same distance I had today. I remember when he passed me. He didn't look like he was even breathing hard. Oh yes—he's a *ricón*, an upperclassman, easily ten years older than me, though I've never asked him his age. I don't know where he gets his stamina.

"I thought I was in pretty good shape until they started running us around," I said. "If this is their soft course, I'd hate to see their hard one."

"It's pretty mean, from what I hear," said Pancho between gulps of unidentifiable pasty food.

"They build tough soldiers on this planet," said Alegria. "It's their only export item."

I nodded. Hellers were known all over the galaxy as first-class scrappers. I'd known one once, on Earth. He'd been as tough as they come. The only people nearly as rough as a Heller were those who had gone through their training course. The hard one.

"We've got a long evening ahead of us," said Miko. "Full-dress exercises."

Oh, no. I hadn't checked the duty board after I'd gotten back. What else had I missed? I hated working out with a field pack. But I couldn't let them see it. Not Miko, anyway.

"Easier than the daytime running," I said, though I

didn't feel very confident about it.

"I wouldn't count on it," said B'oosa, rising. "See you there." He placed his tray on a conveyor belt that led out of the hall. I imagined there was a monster at the other end of the belt, gobbling up any leftover food. It would have to have a titanium alloy stomach.

I looked glumly at my own tray. Three piles of amorphous gray matter filled it from rim to rim. It was supposed to be nutritious, guaranteed to keep a body full of energy. It tasted even worse than it looked.

Pancho was shoveling it away. I wondered what they normally ate on Selva that could have possibly prepared him for this slop. I didn't want to think about it too much.

"At least it'll be cooler in the evening," said Alegria.

Pancho nodded. "But those field packs are heavy," he said.

"Feel like they weigh a thousand kilos," said Miko. "Like carrying a bear around on your back."

"It's only 37.5 kilos," I said, and then wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

"Not much for you," said Miko. "The rest of us have to get along with normal bodies."

We could have been kidding, but we weren't. Miko and I were not the best of friends. He saw me as a rival, and I saw him as an interloper.

Alegria had gotten on *Starschool* at Selva, the stop before mine. We got to be pretty close friends and, in spite of her being so short, I guess it was always in the back of my mind that someday we might be more than friends. Well, Miko got on at Earth, and Alegria liked him instantly—she liked everything about that damned antique of a planet.

I guess I was a little obvious in my dislike for him, and that got Alegria to taking sides. Then the impudent little dwarf challenged me in the gym. He started it; I couldn't back down. I just did what I had to do. It only took a dab of plastiflesh to patch him up. Alegria was mad. Pancho, too. Me, too—only Miko didn't seem to mind. He'd done what he wanted to do.

Alegria stood up from the table, picking up her plate. "I'm finished," she said, walking away. Miko followed her, even though he still had food on his plate.

"What'd I do?" I asked Pancho.

He just shook his head and we finished eating in silence.

We were late to the briefing session and had to stand at the rear, at attention. A Heller officer stood at the front and surveyed us with a look of weary contempt.

"Hell is no place for soft people," he began. "You students are softer than most. We don't have much time with you to change that, but we're going to try. You're on this tour to learn and we're here to teach. To teach you a few things about life and how to keep it. It won't be easy. What you've done so far has been child's play compared to what will follow. Our objective here is simple: we want to push each and every one of you up to your own individual breaking point. Then we're going to push you a little harder. You'll hate us for it. Maybe later, at some important time in your life, you'll thank us for it. Pay attention. In the next two weeks you just might learn something."

He looked around the room, relaxed a little, leaned

against the top of the desk.

"I suppose you students don't like it out here in the desert. You should. It may not be comfortable, but it's safe. Not many dangerous animals in the desert. Oh, there are a few, but not too many. The really mean ones are large and we can see them coming."

They'd warned us about some of those creatures, but we hadn't seen any. Just hearing about the sandlizards was enough, though. Hoped I'd never meet one.

"We put four groups and people like you in these desert compounds. That way we don't lose too many. Most regular recruits spend their first few days in Panoply. You'll be jumping there tonight, in full field dress. It's a little more dangerous than here, but I think you'll be able to handle it. We jump at 1800 hours. I'll now turn you over to Sergeant Santino, who will dismiss you. That's all."

He turned and left the hall abruptly. Bruno came forward.

"All right, children, I guess your butts have had enough exercise for now, let's get the rest of you in shape. Gonna be a long night. As you leave here I want you to do twenty laps around the complex. The last ten people to finish will do twenty more. Move!"

At least I was standing in back. I got a head start.



Vertigo. The desert suddenly dropped out from beneath my feet. I gripped the webbing tightly and closed my eyes. B'oosa laughed. It was 1800 hours, to the second.

They had loaded us into three of those huge floaters for the jump. I had a good view; too good. My two and a half meters wouldn't fit into one of the regular seats, so they put me up front where there was some room for my legs to dangle. B'oosa sat beside me, Bruno was next to him. It was a long way down. The barracks looked like a scattering of small black mirrors. Soon they were gone.

We slipped over a mountain range and headed out over the water. Panoply was an island quite a distance from shore. That was one of the things that made it "safe." The other was that periodically a team of Hellers swept from one end of the island to the other. It was supposed to be just about as safe as any non-desert place in Hell could be. The thought didn't cheer me.

The trip took a little longer than it should have. We had to skirt around the southern edge of Purgatory because there was a war going on. An interplanetary war.

I guess I should explain.

The Confederación forbids actual interplanetary wars. By that I mean that we don't have ships fighting it out in space or bombing planets. It was tried once, by a planet called October. October doesn't exist any more; the Confederación moved in and sterilized the planet, wiped it clean. That pretty much stopped anybody from trying it again. Of course, I could never see much use for it, anyway. There's just not much cash flow between planets, not enough to fight a war over.

Occasionally there's a big gripe between two planets and they fight it out on Purgatory. Purgatory is a fair-sized

continent that the Hellers lease out to factions who don't want to dirty their own planets up. Each side puts up a bond and they slug it out according to the rules. The rules are simple: nothing stronger than Class 3, low-yield nukes. Everything else goes. Part of the bond goes to clean up the mess on Purgatory when it's over, but the Hellers pocket most of it.

The Confederación doesn't care what people do on their own planets, so there are always a lot of candidates for Hell's unique training program.

No Springer, of course. On Springworld we have our hands full just fighting the planet. Who has time for anything else? Besides, we don't try to impose one rigid system on everybody. If something isn't working, we just try something else until we find one that does. It seems like a waste of energy and resources trying to "prove" that one system is right and another is wrong. It either works or it doesn't. Seems simple to me.

(There have never been any wars on Hell between Hellers. They may know something the others don't.)

We dropped down close to the water and skimmed along about a meter above the whitecaps until the shore of Panoply rushed up. The island was surrounded by a narrow, sandy beach cut off immediately by a wall of impenetrable jungle. Turning into a small cove, we came down on a landing pad near a cluster of buildings set in a clearing.

We got off the floaters and split up into our training units—TU's, they call them. Love their abbreviations. There were five in ours, the maximum number: B'oosa, Pancho, Alegria, Miko, and me. All across the field people gathered in small clusters. A Heller came up to our group. We sat on the grass. My ears still rang from the wind that had torn at us in the open floater.



"Name's Vito Fargnoli," said the Heller. "Most people call me Skeeter, so you might as well." As he talked he drew a knife from his belt, flipped it from hand to hand. "I don't know what you've been told about this place, but it ain't no holiday here. Safer than most places 'round here, but that ain't saying much. You're going to take a tamed version of the survival test we run all raw recruits through. You'll have it easier than them, but not too much. We swept the island a couple of weeks ago, but it's a big island. Could have missed a sucker or two."

Suckers were round animals about the size of the palm of my hand. They liked to drop out of trees. Their bodies were soft, but their skeleton was a lot of sharp spines. When they hit, their spines stuck and the animal created an instant mouth where the spines had pierced its victim. Enough of them got you at once and they could bleed you dry. They tended to come in bunches, too.

"Isn't it the big ones we have to watch out for?" asked Miko.

The Heller spit on the grass. "Not necessarily," he said. "Biggest thing on the island is a beast we call the masher. Six meters tall and all teeth. Three rows of teeth and if you get close enough to count 'em they'll be the last thing you'll ever see. You'll never have to get that close. They got no natural enemies here; they just clump around and make a lot of noise. You can hear them a couple clicks away. Just head the other way. A vibroclub'll bring one down in a second. Stunner's better, though, don't need to get as close."

"Mostly you should watch for the small things, the night bats, the land eels. If you stay on the path, you shouldn't have much trouble."

"Path?" I asked. "What path?"

"Students," he said. "What do you know? Nothing. It's



all very simple. We take you out to a place and drop you. You follow the paths back to here. The paths are kept clean, cleaner even than the rest of the island. If you stay on them you should have no trouble. You watch your step, you follow the path, you come back here. I would think even a student would understand that."

He pulled a small box, about ten centimeters square, out of his field pack and set it in front of him. "This is a transmitter," he said. "What it does is transmit a call for help and give us your location. All you have to do is press this little button on the side. The red light shows you're transmitting, the green light shows we receive you and are on our way to pick you up. One of you carries this. Don't lose it."

B'oosa reached out, picked it up.

"I suppose you've worked out in field packs before," said the Heller. We all nodded. It was an understatement. We'd drilled with the things on our backs every day. I almost felt naked on Hell without one.

"You have the standard week's ration of dehydrated food, but I don't expect you'll use much of it. Shouldn't be out much more than a day. We'll issue your group two vibroclubs and a stunner. Please try not to injure each other with them."

I tried to hide a smile. I knew my way around a vibroclub pretty well, as did B'oosa and Pancho. I didn't see any trouble there. If worse came to worst, B'oosa could make a staff from a branch. There's nothing he can't stop with a staff. I bet he could even handle a masher.

The Heller gave his knife a casual backhand flip. It landed about five centimeters from my left foot.

"You," he said, looking at me. "Where you from?"
"Springworld," I said.

"Heard of that place. Supposed to be a pretty rough planet. That true?"

I nodded, pulled the knife out of the ground. It was true. Scratching a living out of the planet took everything a person had to give, and sometimes more. I'd had to scramble all my life.

"Well, you got to be more than tough out there." He nodded his head toward the jungle. "You got to be smart to stay alive." He looked at his digital. "You won't get any smarter talking to me. Let's go."

I handed him his knife back. I would have tossed it back to him, but I might have missed. It might have made him mad. Never make a Heller mad.

The small floater lifted off, skimming the treetops. As it disappeared, the jungle noises started. They weren't loud noises, just a background of crunching and scurrying sounds. Occasionally a growl or squawk. We were all standing very close together.

Four paths led away from the clearing. "Which way do we go?" I asked. "The floater went in so many circles I lost my bearings."

"We find water," said B'oosa.

"Why?" asked Pancho.

"A stream will lead us to the coast. From there we can find the camp."

It sounded as good as anything to me. We split into two

groups and checked the paths out. Pancho and Alegria found one with a stream running beside it. We followed it.

At first it wasn't so bad. The path was pretty clear and wide enough for two people to walk side by side. That didn't last very long. Soon the jungle closed in overhead and then it was pressing in from the sides. The blocking off of the sky made it quite a bit darker. The air was heavy with the smell of rotting vegetation.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" I asked B'oosa. He was behind me as we walked slowly, single file, down the dark path.

"Not really, but it's close," he said. "The sun was setting in roughly the right direction. I'll get a better fix when the stars come out."

"You studied the star chart for this planet?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "Didn't you?" He laughed and I knew he didn't need an answer.

"Down!" yelled Pancho. He was guarding the rear of our line.

As I hit the ground, I rolled onto my back. Somehow I had a vibroclub in my hand. By then it was all over.

About a meter above my head I saw the red-and-yellow flash of the tail end of a slasher. I broke out in a cold sweat. That had been close.

A slasher is something like a cross between a snake and a bat; long narrow body and leathery wings. Its whole body is covered with razor-sharp plates that bristle forward when it attacks. If it brushes your shoulder you lose an arm.

Shaking, I got to my feet. B'oosa was looking off into the brush where the slasher had disappeared. I swear he was smiling.

"Guess they missed that one," said Miko.

"Maybe, maybe not," B'oosa said.

Alegria got to her feet. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"They clear off a lot of animals when they check the island, but not all of them. Some they miss, but some they deactivate."

"Deactivate?"

"The scales on that slasher were filed down. If it had hit you it would have bruised you, nothing more. Unless it scared you to death. There are a lot of declawed and defanged animals around here."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I've been doing more research about this planet than studying star charts. Not just in books, either. Last night while you were on guard duty I was out having a couple of beers with the instructors. Bruno gave me that interesting piece of information. They don't like to kill off students, even if their insurance covers it. Which it does."

Bruno. "Did your buddy also tell you which paths to follow?"

B'oosa just smiled. "We'd better get moving. It'll be getting dark soon and we don't want to have to set up camp by starlight."

We picked ourselves up, feeling scared and foolish, and headed down what was left of the path. Occasionally we had to hack away some vines or underbrush to make headway. Vegetation grew fast in the humid jungle. We saw another slasher, but it wasn't near us. I couldn't tell

whether its scales had been blunted or not.

Just as I thought the trail was going to give out, it took a hard left turn and opened into a small clearing. It looked like a good place to set up camp. We couldn't see where the trail left the clearing, but it was getting dark and we figured we'd find it in the morning.

Alegria and Pancho popped up the tent while Miko started getting dinner ready. B'oosa, Pancho, and I checked out the perimeter of the clearing and gathered wood for a fire.

The perimeter seemed clear, for the time being. We piled the wood and broke a couple of fire sticks to start a campfire. The rations we had for dinner were serviceable, if tasteless. The fire was more for our peace of mind than anything else; it might or might not keep animals away. We sat around it and the flickering light played shadows across our faces. Some sort of a frog started croaking and soon it sounded like there were thousands going all at once. At least it drowned out some of the more unpleasant noises.

B'oosa reached into his field pack beside him and drew out a small musical instrument. I assume it was from Nurodesia; I'd never seen one like it before. He blew through it and the sound that came out was soft and reedy. He played for a long time and I leaned back and listened. It was a side of B'oosa I'd never imagined.

The fire died down and I rolled another log onto it. Pancho and Miko bedded down. It was getting late.

"I'd better go relieve Alegria," I said. We'd drawn straws for the watches. I had the second one.

B'oosa nodded, stirring coals with a long stick. "Be turning in myself, shortly," he said.

I walked to the edge of the clearing where Alegria was sitting on a log.

"Quiet?" I asked her.

"Not quiet," she said, "but uneventful. I don't think this place is ever quiet."

"I guess you could get used to it after awhile," I said.

"You can get used to anything after awhile," she said. "But that doesn't mean you have to like it."

"Does it bother you?"

"The jungle? No."

"Do I?"

"Do you what?" she asked.

"Do I bother you?"

"Why do you ask that?" She turned to me, half her face outlined by the fire, the other in darkness.

"You seemed to . . ." I groped for words. "I mean, since Miko came on the tour . . ."

"Let's not start that again, Carl. You're my friend and he's my friend. Leave it at that."

"But I thought—"

"That's your trouble. You think too much. For a big guy, you sure get messed up by little things." She handed me the stunner. "I'm going to turn in. Holler if you see any beasties."

"But, Alegria . . ."

"But what, Carl? What?" She stood as tall as her short little body would let her.

"Nothing," I said. "See you in the morning."

She walked back to the camp without saying anything



else. I felt foolish, stupid. I don't know why I always seem to say the wrong things around her. I'm usually okay with anyone else, but around her my brain gets all fuzzy and my foot heads right for my mouth. Sometimes I feel like such a dighitin' fool.

I saw B'oosa and Alegria stoke the fire and turn in. Feeling restless, I shouldered the stunner and walked around the perimeter of the clearing. That didn't help much, so I turned around and walked back the other way. As far as I could see, there wasn't much moving around our camp. There were a lot of grunts and rustlings from the jungle but most were just frog noises. Everything else seemed far away. Once I saw some night bats fly overhead, but they're not much of a problem unless they come close. I sat back on the rock.

Funny thing, I started thinking about Springworld. When the scholarship came through I was the happiest guy around. I'd spent all my life scrambling over the rocks, helping my family harvest the volmer plants. You'd have to feel the winds to believe them, and when the summer storms came in, forget it.

We never had much, but as a kid I didn't know that. I thought everybody lived the way we did. When I got older I learned better, though there didn't seem to be much I could do about it. The poor stay poor, that's a fact, on Springworld especially. Trapped.

When I was really small, I thought my father could do anything. At nine, I realized he had faults and failures. At eleven, I realized he was just a man in a hopeless situation, trying to do the best he could. At thirteen, I realized

he was the person I would grow up to be. At sixteen, I took the exams to try and break the pattern in front of me. It seemed the only way open to me. Somehow it worked.

I was the first in my family to have the opportunity to have such a fine education.

I was the first in eight generations of Boks to be able to escape a life of harvests, a life ruled by the whims of a hostile planet, the whims of mercenary traders who have you at their mercy.

I was the hope of my family. Their dreams were pinned on me.

And sometimes I felt like it was all a waste; I didn't know anything at all, never would.

Sitting on the log, I could just barely make out a few stars through the tops of the trees. I felt a long way from home.

My leg had fallen asleep. I moved it around until the circulation came back. Listening carefully to the night sounds, I walked around the clearing again. Maybe Alegria was right. Maybe I do think too much. I kept walking. Soon Miko joined me; he had the next shift.

I gave him the stunner and told him where I'd left the lantern. So far we hadn't had to use it.

I put a couple more logs on the fire, then I went into the tent and crawled into my bag. Alegria was in the bag next to mine, a thousand light years away. I fell asleep quickly and wandered into troubled dreams.

I woke when someone stepped on my shoulder. It was B'oosa, looking out the tent flap. I started to sit up. He turned and put a finger to his lips.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Trouble," he said. "Big trouble."

I got out of my sleeping bag and crawled over to him. Looking out, I could see five or six shapes at the edge of the clearing. Miko was stretched out beside the log, asleep or dead or unconscious.

"What are they?" I asked. "I can't make them out."

"Killer snails," he said flatly.

That was big trouble. They called them snails because they had a shell on their back. That was where the resemblance stopped. They weren't slow; they moved on about a thousand little legs. Quickly. Spaced around their shells were several thick tentacles, which secreted an acid-based poison. Even if the poison didn't kill you outright, the acid would tear away at your skin.

"Are they, uh, deactivated?" I asked.

"I doubt it. Take a deep breath."

It was unmistakable, the sharp tang of hydrochloric acid. One of the creatures moved towards Miko. It was going slowly, its tentacles waving ceaselessly in the air.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"Wake the others."

"We're awake," said Alegria from behind me.

"We've got to get the stunner," said B'oosa. "That's the only way we can handle them. Miko's okay so long as he doesn't move. He may only be asleep." We were only too aware of the alternatives. "Who's got the fire sticks?" he asked.

"I do." It was Pancho. "About a dozen of them."

"We might be able to create a diversion using them. If you toss them in the fire it might confuse things enough that we could reach the stunner."

"All of them?" asked Pancho. "That would—"

"I know what it'll do," said B'oosa. "A lot of noise, a lot of light and a lot of fire. It can only help us."

"Who goes for the stunner?" I asked.

"We all do. I'll follow Pancho out of the tent. When he tosses the fire sticks I'm on my way. You all follow. Carl, you take one vibroclub, Alegria has the other. Don't use them unless you have to. If you're close enough to hit it with a vibroclub, it's close enough to hit you with a tentacle. Don't try anything fancy. Once we get to the stunner we can handle them with no trouble. Try and keep Pancho between you. He's the only one without a weapon."

"You," said Pancho. "Where is your weapon?"

B'oosa reached down beside him and lifted a good-sized staff. "I cut it last night."

"What about the one by Miko?" asked Alegria.

"We'll just have to handle it ourselves," said B'oosa. "I'm counting on the fire distracting it. If we tried to yell to Miko, he'd move reflexively and it'd be on him in a second."

"I've got the fire sticks," said Pancho. I'd already grabbed one of the vibroclubs; Alegria had the other.

"You get up front," said B'oosa. "Go when you're ready, we'll follow you out."

Pancho sprang out of the tent, running low, and we followed. I was just untangled from the flaps when I saw the fire sticks arc toward the fire. I grabbed the ground; the concussion lifted me and rolled me over.

I picked up the vibroclub and staggered to my feet. The creatures seemed confused, from the explosion and the sudden variety of meals; they shuffled back and forth as if in indecision. Alegria and B'oosa were on their hands and knees, between the fire and one of the killer snails. I moved toward that one.

Vibroclub probably wouldn't do anything to the shell. I shouted at the beast and it spun around, surprisingly fast. It charged, jaws grinding, tentacles waving. When it was a few meters away I tossed the humming vibroclub underhand, right in front of it. It scurried over the weapon and gave out a terrible gurgling howl, then flipped forward, landing on its back, centipede legs writhing.

I cautiously retrieved the 'club and looked around. Miko was on his feet now, but there was a killer snail between him and the stunner. B'oosa was holding one at bay with his staff, protecting Alegria as well as himself.

I stood there one second too long, deciding—the upside-down creature's tentacles were flailing around and one of them brushed my hand. It was like being slapped with a burning torch. I flinched away and dropped the club.

Pancho ran over and scooped up the vibroclub, then charged the snail that was blocking our way to the stunner. He started to circle it warily, but had come in too close; a tentacle whipped out and wrapped around his left leg. I ran to help, but he took care of it himself, banging the monster on the face when it pulled him in for the kill. It flipped

with the same somersault reaction mine had; Pancho rolled away, holding his leg and moaning.

I went for the stunner and fired off six or seven quick shots and suddenly everything was quiet. Except for the crackling of the fire and Pancho, cursing in a strange, soft monotone.

Alegria and I bent over Pancho. The acid had eaten through his pants leg and was starting on his flesh. B'oosa pushed me aside and pulled a first aid kit from his pack. He ripped Pancho's pants leg open up to the knee and applied a salve. He seemed to know what he was doing. I noticed B'oosa was the only one wearing his pack. I automatically looked toward the tent where I'd left mine. There wasn't anything left of the tent but some smoldering plastic and blackened poles.

B'oosa applied some salve to my hand, too. The salve was cold and took away the sting, but left a deep, throbbing pain. I could imagine what Pancho was feeling.

Miko sat next to me. "What happened?" he asked.

"That's what I was going to ask you," I said sharply.

"I must have . . ." he said. "I mean, I never saw them."

"What you mean is you fell asleep," I said.

"I guess so."

"That could have killed us. All of us." I was thinking more of Pancho than myself. Suddenly I was filled with anger and frustration. "That was plain stupid, plain—"

"Carl," said Alegria. "That's not going to get us anywhere."

"She's right," said B'oosa. "We'd better call for help."

Reaching into his pack, he pulled out the small transmitter. He thumbed the switch, but the red light didn't go on. Neither did the green one. He flicked it back and forth a few times. Nothing.

"Looks like we're on our own," he said.

"I don't suppose Bruno said anything about this," I said.

He just shook his head. "How do you feel, Pancho?"

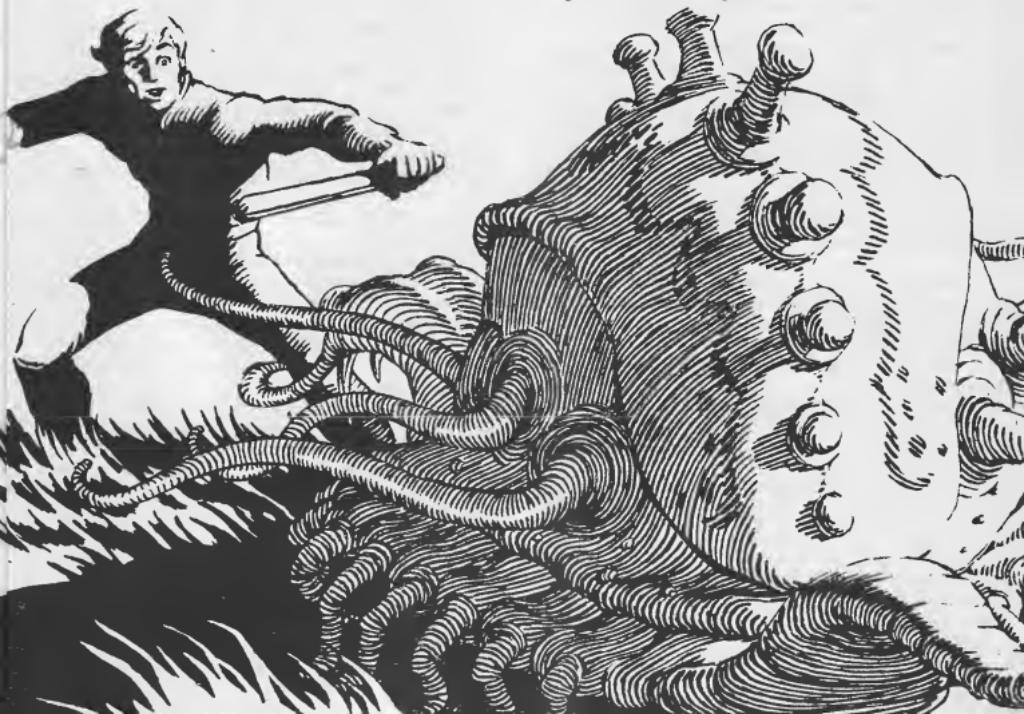
"It hurts, amigo, but I can make it."

"We'll leave at dawn," said B'oosa. "It shouldn't take too long."

We gathered up what equipment we could salvage. It wasn't much. B'oosa and Miko were the only ones who had their field packs. Everything in the tent was lost.

The rest of the night we just sat around. Nobody slept. Every time my hand would start hurting I'd think of Pancho and try to ignore it. He must have been in real pain. I avoided Miko, though B'oosa and Alegria both had long talks with him. It may not have been rational, but I blamed him for all of this. When it started to get light we cut some poles and made a sling between them with vines, to carry Pancho. He couldn't possibly walk.

Miko and B'oosa found the path leading out of the clearing. The fire had died down and the clearing was a charred mess. The snails weren't dead, but they wouldn't be moving for a long time; I hoped something would come along and eat them. We pooled what food we had, shared



a little for breakfast, and started out.

Pancho's leg was infected. It hurt when he bounced around and had ugly red streaks around it. He'd need expert medical attention soon. My hand throbbed and was starting to swell and get puffy.

We settled into a routine. I carried the head of the stretcher and Miko carried the foot end. I had to walk bent over most of the time and even then my end was quite a bit higher than the other. B'oosa took the lead, chopping the path clear and keeping an eye out. Alegria followed, wearing Miko's pack and keeping an eye on our rear. She saw two slashers; one came too close and she shot it with the stunner. Its plates were razor sharp.

I plodded along behind B'oosa. Pancho wasn't heavy, but we covered a lot of ground and my arms were beginning to tire. Occasionally, B'oosa would rub some more salve on my hand and on Pancho's leg. It helped a little. Just before we stopped for lunch, Pancho got delirious and then passed out. We ate lunch without tasting, without talking. Miko sat on a rock, his eyes dull. I couldn't think any farther ahead than one foot after another. B'oosa fiddled with the transmitter. Nothing seemed to be working. We finished eating and walked on.

I was ready to lie down and give up. My body was throbbing a thousand protests; my hand felt like it was sitting in a bed of coals. We ran out of salve. Pancho was running a high fever. I had a cramp in my left leg and was staggering; I didn't think we were ever going to get back to the camp. We might even be going the wrong way. Maybe B'oosa was mistaken. I began to feel feverish myself. Things started to get blurry.

Twenty more steps and I figured I'd quit. I counted out twenty steps and decided I'd do twenty more. Then twenty more. I went down the path convinced that each step was my last. I think I fell a couple of times. I think I remember B'oosa helping me up. Only then it wasn't B'oosa, it was somebody else. Somebody familiar. Scooter? Skeeter? Vito Farnoli, the Heller who had dropped us off. Bruno was there too. I tried to say something to him and all the hate welled up and everything went blank. It was just like sliding down a tunnel. A black tunnel.

When I came to I was stretched out on a bunk. The first thing I noticed was that it was too short. Then I noticed the small bandage on my hand. I sat up and Pancho grinned at me from the next bed.

"Buenos días, amigo," said Pancho. "Did you enjoy your sleep?"

"Sleep?" I asked, shaking my head, trying to clear it.

"You've slept the day around," said Pancho. "How do you feel?"

"Okay, I guess. But you . . ."

"I'm okay, amigo. Look." He pulled back his sheet and showed me his leg. You could hardly see where the plastic flesh joined with the real flesh. I peeked under my bandage. My hand looked just as good.

"They must have some pretty good doctors around here," I said.

"The best," said Pancho. "They import them from Earth."

"That explains it." I knew all about Earth doctors from

past experience. They *were* the best.

"They brought you some broth," said Pancho. "Give it a try."

I looked at the bowl on the stand by my bed and remembered Pancho shoveling away the gray, pasty food the other day. But I was hungry and sipped it. It wasn't half bad. I was surprised, first decent food I'd had on Hell. I drank it all.

"Watch this," said Pancho, slipping out of bed.

"Wait," I said. "Don't . . ."

"It's all right, Carl. No problem at all. Mostly it was just the poison in my system. One shot and I was good as new. See?"

I saw and was impressed. I'd figured at best he'd be laid up for a week or so. Last time I'd looked at him I'd thought he was almost dead. The wonders of modern medicine. I moved my fingers and they worked fine. More wonders.

"What am I doing still in bed?" I asked.

"Beats the bananas out of me, amigo. Sleeping, I guess. You always were one for lots of sack time. Let's get dressed and find the others."

It sounded good to me. We dressed and went wandering. Found B'oosa in the canteen, alone. He didn't know where Alegria and Miko were. I don't know why it bothered me, but it did. B'oosa looked preoccupied. We sat down anyway.

"What's the good word?" asked Pancho.

"Not much," said B'oosa, pushing his coffee cup away from him. "Not many good words at all."

"What's wrong?" I asked. I'd never seen B'oosa quite so upset.

"They were there all the time," he said softly.

"Who? Where?"

"The Hellers," said B'oosa, shaking his head. "We were never out of their sight. Skeeter and Bruno were there all the time. They only stepped in at the last minute."

"You mean they let all that happen?" I couldn't believe it.

"Afraid so," said B'oosa. "All part of the 'soft' survival training course."

"Survival? They could have killed us."

"I doubt it," said B'oosa. "They would have done something if it had gotten too serious."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

B'oosa looked thoughtful. "No, I'm not sure, but I'd like to believe it."

"And the transmitter?"

"It was never supposed to work. But the next one will, they assured me."

"Next one? What next one?"

B'oosa nodded toward the door. "Here they come. Let them tell you."

Skeeter and Bruno were walking toward the table. I felt like knocking a few heads together.

"Hello, students," said Bruno. "Ready for some cold weather?"

"What cold weather?" asked Pancho.

"We jump at 0800," said Bruno, dropping an envelope on the table. "Here's the schedule. Pick up your gear this evening. Tomorrow we'll be on the high plateau. See you

then." He turned and left. Skeeter stayed for a second.

"You okay, Pancho?" he asked.

Pancho shrugged. "I guess I'll live."

Skeeter looked nervous, blushed a little. "Hey, I'm sorry about what happened. If I'd had my way—"

"Skeeter. Get a move on," shouted Bruno from the door.

"Sorry, Pancho. Really I am," he said and left.

B'oosa had opened the envelope. "Same procedure," he said. "Only arctic conditions this time. Too bad about that, don't like being cold. Heat I can take, but cold . . ."

"Who's going?" I asked.

"Same crew," said B'oosa.

"No way," I said. "I refuse to go out with Miko again. Not when my life may depend on him staying awake."

"Calm down, Carl," said Pancho. "He feels real bad about it. I think he wants to make it up to you—to us."

"I don't care," I said. "I won't do it."

"Yes you will," said B'oosa quietly. He slid the assignments across the table. They were signed by the dean.

I could get out of it if I really wanted to. If I wanted to flunk, to look like a coward, to look like a fool. Trapped again. If the dean hadn't signed it, I might have had a chance. He doesn't sign many documents like this, so he must have wanted this crew together for some reason. Offhand, I couldn't think of a single good one.

I wondered how cold it would be.



It looked simple, which by itself made me suspicious. They set us down on the peak of a small mountain. The place we were headed for was on the far side of the valley below us. We could even see the tops of the base's antennas in the distance. All we had to do was get off the mountain and cross the delta. Couldn't have been more than 30 klicks. A piece of cake.

At first we split up and looked for an easy way down the mountain. There weren't any. I found about a dozen places I could have gone down alone, but not with everybody else tied to me. On Springworld I'd climbed mountains like this since I was five years old. Of the others, only B'oosa had any experience on mountains. The rest were all flatlanders, as we call them on Springworld.

B'oosa found a route he thought we might be able to manage together. It started out as a more-or-less sheer face that led down and across to a vertical fissure. Formations directly above the fissure would have made rappelling difficult; we'd have to transverse, go down sideways to it. After the fissure it didn't look like it would be too hard.

"What do you think?" asked B'oosa.

I took a long look at the sheer face. The surface of the cliff was uneven and ought to provide fairly good foot and hand holds. It was cold, though, probably be some ice. I looked at the sky. It was a slate gray from horizon to horizon, could be a storm coming in. Ordinarily I wouldn't even consider starting a descent under these conditions.

"Guess it'll do," I said. "At least it's not snowing."

"Not yet," said B'oosa.

We got everyone together and explained what we had to do. B'oosa would go first and I'd take up the other end. Nobody moved until they were told to by B'oosa or myself.

self. We double checked our equipment and headed for the edge.

B'oosa went over. I watched him descend. He was pretty good, no doubt about it. Only one arm or leg would move at a time. He checked each hold carefully before committing his weight to it. As he went down he'd drive pitons into the rock face, sliding the rope through their clips. He went sideways as much as down, guided by the nature of the cliff rather than our wishes. Soon he stopped, hollered up to the rest of us to follow. I had a good, secure position, the rope played down from me to B'oosa without kinks or sharp bends.

Pancho was the first to follow. He went slowly, checking each hold several times. Each time he reached one of the pitons, he'd pull some slack from the far side of the rope and slip it through the clip on the right side of his belt. He'd hang there for a second before he unclipped the trailing section of rope from his left side and moved on past the piton. It was slow progress, but he was doing a good job. No such thing as being too careful on the side of a mountain.

Alegria was the next over. She came easily, gracefully. I'd never seen anyone take to the ropes so naturally. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought she'd been doing it all her life. Her moves were careful, but smooth. She went along the rock as if she was part of it. I couldn't detect a single trace of nervousness. She moved like a cat and I figured she was a good person to have in the middle.

Miko went over after Alegria. He wasn't surefooted, but at least he didn't do anything stupid. A couple of times he stopped and didn't seem to be able to find the next hold. I could see them from where I was. I started after him and helped him along.

I immediately slipped into the old rhythms and patterns. Funny how you never seem to lose certain skills once you learn them, even if you don't practice them. I felt right at home. Even having Miko in front of me didn't bother me too much.

Most people would think that going first in a line like this would be the most dangerous position. It isn't true. The person taking up the rear runs the greatest risk. I know, I've done it both ways. Many times.

It got a little harder. Once B'oosa trapped himself in a dead end, found himself with no place to get a forward hold. He could have driven in a piton and tried to swing out and find one, but the others wouldn't have been able to follow. We had to back up and follow a different tack. It worked a little better, but that had cost us some valuable time and the wind was picking up. B'oosa signaled us and we started forward again.

By the time we caught up with B'oosa, the wind was coming full force. There was nothing to do but grit our teeth and keep on going. When we got to the fissure at least we'd be sheltered from the wind. I guessed it would take two more stretches. B'oosa took the slack rope and moved on.

It was starting to rain. Just a little at first, but the wind made it seem colder than it was. It made the rocks slippery, too, and the going was slower. I wanted to get to the fissure before things started icing up and I guess that was where I made my mistake, going too fast. If I hadn't been



It wasn't the first time I'd fallen, so I knew what to expect. I'd only go down until the rope stretched to the next piton, then I'd stop and swing. I tried to let my body relax. There was a sharp double yank on the rope. All bets were off, that was probably a piton pulling loose. No telling what would happen now.

The rocks slapped and tore at my face and hands as I fell. I tried to grab anything that slipped by. If I couldn't hold it, at least it would slow me down. It didn't look as though I was going to be able to get a good grip on anything; the rocks were wet with rain and my fingers were wet with blood. Somewhere I heard someone yell. It could have been me.

My right foot hit a small outcropping and I threw my body hard against it. Pain ripped through my side as the rock tore along my body. It slowed me down. I scrambled for toeholds, footholds, mouth holds, anything. The outcropping caught me in the chin, I hugged the side of the cliff. Somehow I stopped. I waited for the others to come falling past me, dragging me along with them. Nothing. All I could hear was my own labored breathing.

I have no idea why I didn't keep falling. As far as I could tell I didn't have a single hold. Arms spread wide, I pressed myself as close to the cliff as possible. It was ridiculous to have gotten myself in such an awkward position. I couldn't move a muscle without losing what little grip I had.

It seemed like I hung there for hours, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. I could feel the rope moving and occasionally muted voices would drift down to me, but I could never quite make out the words. Dirt and small pebbles fell past me as they worked their way down to me. My left leg, in an awkward position, started to twitch. My nose itched, like it always does when you can't scratch it. I felt more dumb than scared. I'd made a bad mistake. More than that, I'd involved other people in it. If I'd done it at home, I would have paid for my mistake alone; here I'd almost dragged four other people along with me.

"Trying to find the quick way down, Carl?" B'oosa's voice startled me.

"I missed my grip," I said. "I slipped."

"We all slip once in a while," said B'oosa. I could hear him driving in a piton, but I didn't dare move my head to see him.

"Almost there," he said. "Just a second . . . Ah, that's got it. I've got the rope secured about two meters above your head and a meter to your left. If you let go and swing to your left, you should find a good grip."

I had no choice but to trust him. I knew he'd done a good job—I don't think he's capable of doing a bad one—but as I swung out, I'll have to admit I wondered if he'd underestimated my weight. He hadn't. I found the grip easily.

"Thanks," I said, breathing hard. "I didn't think that piton would pull loose."

"It didn't pull loose, Carl," B'oosa said slowly.

"What do you mean?"

in such a hurry it never would have happened.

Miko had gone ahead while I fooled with a troublesome kink in the rope. Everyone was out of sight around a ledge and I was in a hurry to catch up. I only had a two-point hold and too much slack when I reached around the ledge. It was a stupid thing to do.

I had a good hold with my left foot and my left hand was fairly secure, but my right side was blocked by the ledge. I was sure there would be a hold on the other side, so I swung my body around. As I passed a certain point in my swing I felt my balance shift and realized I was in trouble. Too much slack. Too far from the nearest piton. If there wasn't anything to grab on the other side of the ledge, I was going to fall. It was as simple as that; all physics and the motion of falling bodies. There wasn't anything to grab. My fingers slid over wet, smooth rocks. I fell over backwards. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

"It broke. Snapped right in two."

"That's impossible. I know I'm heavy, but those pitons are built to take it."

"That one didn't," he said in a tone of voice that made me shiver. "And I'm not too sure about the others."

I didn't like the implications.

"I'm going back to the other end," he said. "Unless you'd rather I took up the rear."

I knew what he was saying. In his usual roundabout, polite way, he was asking me if I'd lost my nerve.

"No, I'm okay," I said. We made the fissure in ten minutes and then we rested.

The fissure was actually a vertical crack that ran the rest of the way down the face of the mountain. It would be fairly easy to work our way down, and clear sailing after that. Almost a hike to the valley.

The top of the fissure was narrow and I could hardly squeeze into it. The others fit comfortably. It had an uneven surface and it was easy to prop your feet against one side of the crack and your shoulders against the other. We rested that way for several minutes before moving down. The storm was gaining in intensity, but we were fairly well sheltered in the fissure.

B'oosa led the way down and I took up the rear position. It went fairly easily. I'd anchor the line and B'oosa would guide the others down as far as the rope would allow, then I'd come down to them and we'd start all over again. It worked real well, except for the time that Pancho slipped, but even that wasn't serious. We decided to camp at the bottom of the fissure, since it was level enough for our tent. It was starting to get dark and the storm showed no signs of letting up.

I drew first watch. There really wasn't too much to watch for. I couldn't imagine any animal being out in weather like this, but if there were any, they'd probably be large, mean, and cold. The rain turned to sleet and when Miko came to relieve me, I headed straight for the sack. I listened to the wind howling for about ten seconds before I fell asleep.

B'oosa woke me up and gave me a hot cup of tea. The wind was still roaring outside the tent. If anything, it was louder than last night. I had about a thousand scrapes and cuts from my little spill the day before and I could feel every one of them.

I stepped outside the tent and the cold sank into me, bone-deep. Everything was covered with a thin layer of ice.

Although we'd come a long way down the day before, we were still fairly high up. Visibility was rotten; I couldn't even see the valley floor. It was still sleetin. Pancho came out and stood beside me.

"What do you think, amigo?"

"Look at all that ice," I said. "I think it's going to take us all day to get off this mountain."

It took two.

They were two hard days. It wasn't that the descent was steep; it was just that the weather never gave up for a sec-

ond. It was hard to keep your footing on even relatively level ground. We spent a lot of time slipping and sliding around. I could see why they had given us five days to reach the station.

Late in the second day, B'oosa took a bad spill on an icy rock. I thought he might have sprained his ankle, though he never said anything. I don't think that guy would complain even if it had been a compound fracture.

The sleet eventually turned to snow. It wasn't really much of an improvement, but we were grateful for even small favors. We camped at the foot of the mountain, with the delta area spread out before us. It was flat, treeless, and cold. A very bleak place.

The delta was a sloppy network of thousands of little creeks and rivers, branching off from a major river that flowed into the northern sea. The smaller ones were probably frozen; it was the others that would be trouble.

It was a big area. We were glad to have the transmitter, and hoped it worked this time. Were they watching us? It would be hard for them to find places to hide.

We broke camp early; the snow stopped just before dawn. The sky brightened to a uniform dull slate, no trace of blue. The wind was strong and gusty, the driven snow constant cold specks of pain on your face.

Walking was difficult. There was about ten centimeters of new snow on top of a hard crust, the melted top of the old snow, which was about twice as deep. All of us except Alegria were heavy enough to break the crust: step, crunch, drag; step, crunch, drag. We kept getting caught in the vegetation, too, which was usually low enough to be hidden by the snow. A mat of interconnected brambles.

The ice was about two meters lower than the shore, with steep banks on both sides. We tested the ice carefully before putting our full weight on it. I went first. Figured if it would hold me it would hold anybody. It wasn't a very wide branch and we got across without any difficulty. If the rest were as easy, we'd make it in fine shape, so long as the weather held.

The rest weren't as easy and the weather didn't hold. It started sleeting again, wet and cold. The next branch we came to was slushy on top with several large holes in the ice.

B'oosa shook his head. "This looks bad."

"You don't think the ice will hold?" I asked.

"It's not that." He scrambled down the bank and we followed, to rest for a minute out of the wind. "These holes are part of the winter ecology of this area. A lot of animals come to them for water; some come to fish."

"Big animals?" Alegria said.

"That's just it. Large predators hang around the holes to feed off the animals that come to drink. Some of them are large enough not to be afraid of five humans." He told us about the snowbeast, the worst one. The size of a small floater, it had six powerful legs, the front pair of which could be used as hands, centaur-style, when it wasn't running or swimming. It had large claws and teeth—in a mouth wide enough to decapitate a person in one snap—and was covered with silky white fur. Its eyes were

saucer-sized and also white. In a snowstorm you could walk within ten meters of one and never see it, never know what killed you. Vibroclubs would be useless, except on the eyes or mouth.

We didn't see any snowbeasts that day, or any other kind of animal larger than a seabird, even though we crossed four rivers with the water holes (giving the holes wide berth, admittedly). It sleeted constantly, until we stopped for the night and put up the tent. Naturally.

It was hard to tell how far we'd gone. The maps they'd given us were crude, on purpose, and one small stream looked just like any other. The visibility was too poor to see the mountains, and back-triangulate. When we got to the main river, we'd know we had covered about a third of the distance. What that meant in terms of time would depend on the weather and the terrain.

The sky was perfectly clear the next morning, and we made pretty good time. We got to the main river after a couple of hours' slogging.

It was a lot wider than it had looked from the mountain. Ice granules floating in a scum of slush rattled along the

bank, but the middle was clear except for large chunks of ice drifting lazily along. We would have to paddle about 200 meters.

Miko took the raft from his pack and pulled the tab that inflated it. It was big enough for three normal people; we'd have to make three crossings.

The first two went without incident, though it was scary to be left on one bank while the stunner was on the other. I kept my knife out and didn't inflate my safety vest until the last minute, to stay maneuverable. Pancho, Alegria, and Miko went over first, then Pancho came back for B'oosa. He was going to come back for me next, but he'd got a cramp on the second crossing, so I drew Miko. B'oosa was too big and Alegria was too small. That didn't please me too much, but I was glad to finally pop my vest and step aboard the raft.

"Current's not bad until we get to the middle," Miko said. "We have to put some back in it then."

The damned thing didn't steer at all; we paddled straight and drifted in a curving diagonal toward the opposite shore. We also used the paddles to push ourselves off the

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ice floes, some of which would be big enough to stand on.

Miko had more boating experience than I did, but I was in front, for being stronger. We were heading toward what looked like a whirlpool. I pointed at it with my paddle. "Does that mean there's a rock underneath, or something? Should we—"

"Wasn't there before, he said quickly. "It's no rock."

Suddenly the water heaved and a huge mound of white fur surfaced. It swiveled around slowly and fixed one large white eye on us. It was no more than ten meters away. The stunner warbled from the opposite shore; the snowbeast turned to look at it and sank leisurely.

"That was too close," Miko said.

I was paddling like a madman. "Idiot! What it was was *too far away!* You can't drop an animal that big from—" Suddenly we were out of the water, tipping crazily, and I had a glimpse of the thing's massive back before I plunged into the black icy water.

A strong man might survive five or six minutes in that water. It only felt cold for an instant; then I was just numb and stinging. I bobbed up coughing, knife in hand, for what it was worth. I tried to find the vibroclub, but it was on the outside of my pack, stuck under the life jacket.

I couldn't see the snowbeast anywhere. Miko was swimming furiously toward a large ice floe. I was closer to the raft, so set out for it.

I don't know how long it took. Trying to stroke and breathe regularly and not think about the mankiller swimming below, ready to kill me with one bite. Somehow I got to the raft, no paddles, and heaved myself half aboard. Started kicking my feet, moving slowly towards shore.

After a few minutes I heard shouting. I looked up and saw the other three hollering and pointing. B'oosa dropped to a marksman's crouch and fired a long burst from the stunner.

They were pointing at Miko, who had made it to the ice floe. He was lying on top of it, evidently unconscious. The snowbeast was just downstream, only its head showing as it swam closer.

Two paws broke out of the water and grabbed for Miko, but he had pulled himself far enough from the edge for the claws not to reach him. The beast howled and started scrabbling aboard. It didn't pay any attention to the stunner, which B'oosa was firing steadily.

It finally got all of its bulk up on the floe. I knew I should be kicking, make it to shore before I became deserted. But I was fascinated by the horror, frozen in more ways than one.

It stood over him, half again my own height even with four feet on the ground. But instead of grabbing Miko and tearing at him, it stood there with its arms limp, shaking its head. The stunner was having some effect. B'oosa never let up firing.

The creature's four knees buckled and it fell, its terrible head less than a meter from Miko.

"Get him!" B'oosa shouted. "In the raft! We'll get a line out." It looked like a long way. I wondered how long the snowbeast would stay unconscious.

I started kicking my way downstream. You couldn't leave anyone to that sort of thing, not even Miko. But I couldn't even feel my legs any more, and it was getting hard to breathe.

By the time I reached the floe I was in a sort of trance from the pain and exertion. I did manage to get up on the ice, but standing there was very strange, as if I were floating two meters off the ground, and didn't exist from the waist down. I may have stood there for a long time, enjoying being out of the water. Someone was shouting from the shore. The beast lay there with its eyes open, one nostril flap moving slowly. We looked at each other for a while. Then I came more or less to my senses, pain waking up my legs, healthy fear seeping into my brain. I dragged Miko to the edge and managed to manhandle him into the raft without drowning him. When I slipped into the water it was like a bath of fire, then numb again. We were about seventy meters from shore. In the serene knowledge that we would never make it, I started kicking.

They were yelling for me to get into the raft. That didn't make any sense, but it did look like a warmer place to be. It took a long time, everything did, and I had to be careful not to dump Mike overboard.

The exertion was almost too much. I felt a new, squeezing pain in the center of my chest. Heart attack? I lay down, using Miko as a pillow. I blacked out, then woke up, then blacked out again.

"Can you reach it?" Miko was whispering. I was annoyed that he woke me up.

"Reach what?"

"The rope. They floated a rope, they say." I could hear shouting, but my ears were ringing too loudly for me to understand. I levered myself up far enough to peer over the edge of the raft. There was a rope, all right, one end tethered to an inflated life jacket, and we were slowly moving toward it. They had thrown it out to where it would hang up on an ice floe; we moved slightly faster than the ice because of the wind.

But the tight pain was still in my chest and my arms felt paralyzed. I waited until the raft touched the rope, then heaved one arm overboard. Sitting up, I dragged the arm back into the raft, and the rope came with it. My hands wouldn't close, to hold the rope, but I managed to twist it around my arm and lean back. Miko tried to help, but all he could do was twitch.

They pulled, and the rope started to slip. I rolled over on it and the world went away, different this time, white sparks instead of blackness.

I managed to make one eye work. There was a light, amorphous and shot through with rainbows. A few good blinks and it sharpened somewhat: a blur that was recognizably B'oosa, sitting under the tent lamp, reading. Another blur, next to me, was Miko wrapped up in a sleeping bag. So was I; it took a certain amount of effort to free my hands, to rub sight back into my eyes.

"Feeling better, Carl?" B'oosa said, without looking up.

"Better than what?" My body was a collection of dull aches and sharp pains. Must be alive. "How long have I been out?"

"Almost two full days."

"Two days!"

"You were suffering from exposure. Badly, as was Miko. It was better that you get some rest. The med kit has marvelous little pink pills for that."

"Where are we?"

"We're still by the river."

"And that noise outside?"

"A storm, a bad one."

I counted sleeping bodies. "Where's Pancho?"

"Outside, keeping watch."

We'd been gone five days, it occurred to me. "They ought to be looking for us by now, right?"

B'oosa shrugged. "Perhaps."

"Did you call them on the transmitter?"

"I tried," he said, holding up the small box, "but I got no results."

"Not again."

"I thought that was strange, too. So I opened the transmitter to see if it could be repaired. This is what I found." He opened the front of the box. Inside the shell it was empty: no wiring, no crystals. "This is not just a broken transmitter, this is a dummy transmitter. It was never intended to work."

"It sounds almost like they were trying to kill us," I said.

"I've given that some thought," said B'oosa. "Unlikely, but possible."

Just then Pancho burst into the tent. "B'oosa, I've—oh, hi Carl—I mean you told me to—"

B'oosa got up, left the tent in a hurry. Alegria followed him out. I went too, after I'd found my clothes.

Outside, I could hardly stand up, the wind was so strong. B'oosa and Alegria were bent over the tent supports. They had been braced and double-braced. Even from where I was, I could see that they weren't going to hold for long.

"We'll have to strike the tent," B'oosa shouted. Alegria nodded.

"I'll help," I said, stumbling forward.

"Get back in your sleeping bag," said B'oosa. "You're too weak."

I started to protest when my legs gave out and I sprawled sideways into the snow. He was right, I was too weak. I crawled back in the tent.

They collapsed the tent on top of the three of us. With a low profile, the tent might stay. They lashed it down pretty well. Eventually Pancho crawled in with us.

"Where's B'oosa?" I asked.

"He's outside, amigo," said Pancho. "Keeping an eye on the tent, and watching out for the snowbeast. He told me he would come in if it got too bad, but frankly, I'm worried."

"Those two days you were out were very hard on our friend. I do not think he is well and he tries to do too much. He pulled you and Miko from the water, you know."

I didn't know. I would have expected it and it was like him not to say anything about it.

"Very bad out there," Pancho said. "I saw the storm come in. It started in the mountains, and like a solid wall it came, a solid wall of ice. Then the wind came up the delta from the sea. They met in the valley and it has been getting worse every hour. When I came in, I honestly could not see my hand in front of my face."

We had such storms on Springworld, during mid-winter. Nobody went out in them, of course. There were stories of people who stepped outside and got lost a few meters from their homes, and started going in circles, to be found at spring thaw, kilometers away. "How long does B'oosa stand guard?"

"One hour, two hours. He'll come get me or Alegria when he's ready."

"Or me," I said. "I couldn't stand a full hour, but—"

"Only if you sleep, amigo." He turned off the light and I could hear him burrowing deeply into his bag.

"Wake up! Everybody wake up!" It was Alegria, and there was the sound of terror in her voice.

"What is it?" Pancho sounded fully awake.

"B'oosa! He's disappeared!" We struggled out of the tent to be greeted by a pale blue sky, no wind, the sun almost warm. No B'oosa, no footprints. No stunner.

Miko staggered and grabbed my arm. I held him up by the shoulders. Being smaller, the exposure had hit him even harder than me. "Shize," he said weakly. "What are we going to do now?"

"We have to look for him," Alegria said. No one would suggest otherwise, of course, but the same thought must have possessed all of us: B'oosa pacing to keep warm, getting turned around, the steep river bank not ten meters away.

Pancho trudged to the bank and peered over. "No sign."

"What we need is a floater," I said. "If he's . . . passed out even half a klick from here, we could search for days and not find him." Especially if his body is buried in a drift.

"We'll quarter the area," Pancho said. "And search for six hours. Then we break camp and set out across the delta."

"With the sun out," I said, "he would start heading in the same direction. If it doesn't start snowing again, we should run into his tracks." I didn't believe it and they didn't believe it, but they all nodded.

We only had three vibroclubs. I gave mine to Alegria, then took B'oosa's staff and lashed my knife to the end of it. Go for the eyes, sure. Pancho assigned directions and we all walked off, searching.

After an hour or so of toeing drifts, I heard somebody yelling—yelling loud, for me to hear him over the ringing in my ears. It was Pancho, back near the campsite waving and pointing.

I looked for a long minute and finally saw the silver speck of a floater, drifting down over the mountains, heading straight for us. I started to run and fell on my face. Got up and hurried carefully.

I got there the same time as the floater. This wasn't the

simple open platform they used to ferry us around; it was a streamlined airfoil with a bubble top. The top slid back and Bruno stepped out. A man I'd never seen followed him. He wasn't dressed for the weather: mottled green combat fatigues with a jacket. He rubbed his hands together and blew into them.

Bruno studied us. "Where's the big black one?"

"He was on guard last night. We lost him."

"Lost him," Bruno turned to the other man. "Sorry. He was the best one."

The man shrugged. "Quantity, not quality."

They both laughed and Bruno unsnapped the holster on his belt. He leisurely drew out a squat black pistol I recognized to be a "neurotangler."

"You're all dead," he said flatly, and clicked off the safety catch.

My home-made spear wasn't balanced for throwing, and I was never that good at underhand, but I flung it at him as hard as I could. At the same instant the 'tangler buzzed and I felt a million tiny pins prick the front of my body, and what strength I had left started to drain away.

The spear struck Bruno squarely in the chest, then fell away. Body armor. Rubbing the spot where it had hit, Bruno dropped everyone else with a negligent wave of the 'tangler.

"He's a fighter," the other man said approvingly. "Good reflexes."

I fell slowly back into the snow. Was this blue sky the last thing I'd ever see? "Bears are good fighters, too," I heard Bruno say. "But they're dumb. Let's dump this shiz into the river."

I heard them dragging the tent; heard it splash.

"Doesn't seem fair," the other one said. "You get insurance for all five. I just—"

"Tough. We made a deal. Help me with the big one."

They grabbed my feet and dragged me. My front was totally numb, but the shocking cold of the snow shoveling up the back of my tunic helped keep me awake.

They didn't drop me in the river. Instead, they muscled me upright and tipped me into the floater. I heard my nose crack on the floor, but didn't feel anything. I saw snow; the floor was transparent plastic.

One by one, they piled the others on top of me. Then they slid the top shut and we took off.

I watched the river drop away and traced my erratic path back to where I'd been searching when the floater came. I wasn't looking for anything, and almost missed it—more footprints! About a hundred meters farther than I'd gone. So B'oosa had survived the storm.

But my hopes evaporated as quickly as they'd risen. It must have still been dark when the snow stopped. The steps went straight to another river, and stopped.



"Come on, troops. Rise and shize." Something hit me hard on the foot and I woke up from a confusing dream.

We were in a white windowless room, with two rows of beds, mostly empty. The man who'd hit my foot with a stick was the one who had been with Bruno in the floater. He had on a different uniform now, with the cluster of

circles on the arm that identified him as a Heller sergeant. Not my favorite branch of the human race.

Besides the four of us, there were two strangers groggily getting out of their beds. We all wore white hospital gowns. Somebody had undressed me—somebody had undressed *Alegria* while she was unconscious. If it were this sergeant I'd break his arm. I'd break his arm off, and beat him with it.

"Stand at attention. In front of the bed, stupid." He had a 'tangler on his hip.

"This training has gone too far," Pancho said. "I'm going to—"

"I'll tell you what you're going to do." The sergeant jabbed the air with his stick, a few centimeters from Pancho's face. Pancho didn't flinch. "Very soon now."

I was still groggy from whatever they'd given us to keep us asleep. My nose hurt, but not as if it were broken. Had they had time to fix it? I took a deep breath and held it, trying to force the fog away.

He stepped to the room's one door and opened it part-way. "By your leave, Commander."

The man who walked in looked too young to have white hair. He was deeply tanned and tall, built like a young athlete. He wore a closely tailored uniform I couldn't identify, with gleaming gold insignia of rank. He stood for a moment, arms folded on his chest, and looked at us with a totally neutral expression. When he spoke, his voice was deep and quiet.

"I am Captain Forrester of Her Majesty's Marine Corps. I will be your commander for one year. Less, if we win in less time."

"Whose Majesty?" Pancho said. The sergeant stepped toward him and raised his baton to strike.

"No, Sergeant." He looked at Pancho. "You haven't been briefed yet?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sir!" the sergeant hissed.

"I don't know what you're talking about sir," Pancho said in a monotone.

"For the next year, all of you will be employed by Her Majesty, Queen Phylle II. Of Sanctuary, on the planet Spicelle. We are here to resolve a dispute between Her Majesty and the reigning monarch of Feder. Also on Spicelle. We will meet Feder's armies in the northeast quadrant of Purgatory, for a clean Class 2/D war, beginning two days from now."

"Sir, there's some mistake," I said. "We aren't soldiers."

"You can say that again," the sergeant muttered.

"You are now," the captain said. "I have your papers."

"This can't be legal," *Alegria* said. "I'm a citizen of Selva, a student. We were kidnapped."

He smiled slightly. "You won't find many lawyers on Hell. Not this Hell, at any rate." He took an envelope from an inside pocket and removed several sheets of paper from it. "You would be Private *Alegria de Saldaña*, formerly of the planet Selva. Now a slave conscript, leased to Her Majesty by Manpower, Incorporated."

"No! We're students, we were on a training—"

"I'll explain, sir," the sergeant said. "When you crossed that river you were on Northland soil. Slavery is legal in Northland; isn't that barbaric? You were legitimately captured by Manpower, Incorporated, and leased through me to Her Majesty."

"We won't fight," I said. "Sir."

"Not all of you will have to fight. It takes more than combat troops to win a war . . . Private Saldana, for instance, is being assigned to an aid station, because she's had paramedical training. You would be . . ." He looked through the papers. "Carl Bok. You will fight, of course."

"No, sir. We don't have war on Springworld. I'm a farmer and a pacifist."

"Here it says that you hired yourself out for gladiatorial combat on Earth. That's an odd trade for a pacifist."

"It's not murder."

"I've heard differently. At any rate, you will fight when ordered to do so, or face certain death. Either by military tribunal or a real-time field decision."

"What are we fighting for?" Miko said. "I've never even heard of Sanctuary, or your Majesty."

"That's immaterial. Do you know what a Class 2/D war is?" Nobody answered. He turned to the sergeant. "I thought you said they were trained."

"Physically trained, sir."

"Ah. Well, for your information, a Class 2/D war is a very good kind of war for you untrained soldiers. We chose this type because our own Marine Corps is not large, and we had to buy most of our footsoldiers here. Frankly, Sanctuary is not an extremely wealthy land, and we could not afford a large number of trained Heller mercenaries. So most of your comrades-in-arms will also be leased conscripts.

"A Class 2/D conflict uses no nuclear weapons, nor lasers, nor any other weapon invented after the year 1900, on Earth, with the sole exception of cybernetic aids to these primitive devices. A reasonably intelligent person can master all of the allowed weapons in a day or two.

"We have further agreed, with Feder, that no artillery be allowed, no aerial observers, nor fragmentation weapons other than simple hand grenades."

"What's a hand grenade?" Miko asked.

The captain sighed. "This is Sergeant Meyer, my Field First Sergeant. He will be training you for the next two days. With God's help he will not only teach you what a hand grenade is, but teach you how not to kill yourself with it.

"Just keep this uppermost in your mind: what has happened to you may seem grossly unfair. But individual justice was never war's domain. If you fight well and carefully you may survive to win your freedom. If you balk, or in any way impede the progress of our endeavor, you will most . . . certainly . . . die." He turned to Meyer. "Sergeant, you will deliver these six to the staging area at 0900 Saturday, fully trained and cooperative."

"Yessir." They saluted, raised fists, and the captain marched out. The sergeant turned to us with a malevolent smile.

"Let me explain that in more detail. There are three ways the army can kill you for disobedience. One is a

trial, a court martial. If the presiding officer finds you guilty, and he usually does, you'll take a deerer; hang by the neck until dead."

"Choke to death?" one of the strangers said.

"It only hurts for a few minutes," the sergeant said. "If you disobey under combat conditions, of course, any officer or non-commissioned officer, such as me, can kill you on the spot.

"The third method is the most useful. The meat squad, TDU, Tactical Diversionary Unit. In essence, we strip you of arms and use you as bait, to draw the enemy's fire. Often we can patch you up and use you again."

I didn't know what I was going to do. I could probably kill somebody who was trying to kill me. But kill in cold blood for somebody else's politics? I wouldn't even kill for my own politics!

But the alternative was dancing at the end of a rope. Was I willing to die for my pacifism? I was probably going to die anyhow. I wished B'oosa was here.

They took Alegría off to the aid station and put us with a group of about fifty men who were doing weapons training. None of us was very enthusiastic, but as the officer had said, the weapons were simple. We used rifle, knife, and hand grenades. The hand grenades were bombs that you threw toward the enemy; when they exploded they shattered into thousands of tiny fragments, so you had to throw them far enough not to get caught in the blast yourself. Or get behind something.

The rifle shot metal bullets, powered by explosive powder, and was deadly simple to use. Looking through the telescopic sight, a bright dot showed you where the bullet would land. It incorporated a rangefinder that also evaluated the speed and direction of the wind between you and your target. So the dot drifted around as the wind shifted, or as you moved from target to target.

We were training in some neutral part of Purgatory, in what amounted to a large prison compound. It was about two kilometers by three, inside a shock-fence, with armed guards on elevated platforms every half-klick or so. When we weren't practicing with the weapons, we were running, doing push-ups, toughening-up in general.

That was curious. Since they'd taken our watches, we didn't know what the date was, and didn't know how long we'd been unconscious. But while we were under they had done something to restore our strength: at our Northland camp I wouldn't have been able to do one push-up, let alone fifty at a time.

We didn't have much time for conversation, but I was able to find out a few things. Most of our fellow-conscripts were military students, sent here from other worlds, who were sent out on Northland maneuvers in small groups, as punishment. One man was a hunter and another was a casual vacationer, who had been talked into signing up for a Northland tour.

It was inconceivable that Hell authorities didn't know about this recruitment-by-kidnapping. And it was obvious that none of us would ever live to tell about it.

Our only hope was to try to make an escape from the battlefield, and try to find our way back to the capital, Hellas. There was only one land bridge connecting Hellas

with Purgatory, so no matter where we were, if we could find the coast and follow it, we would eventually get there. Our chances of escaping were probably as slim as our chances of surviving the long trek, but there didn't seem to be any other way out.

Once in Hellas, we could get help from some Confederación official. If the military didn't find us first.

That first night, another alternative presented itself. It was grotesque, but it had one advantage: it might keep the army from killing us as soon as the war was over.

We trained for eighteen or twenty hours and then staggered back to the barracks, for cold gruel and hard beds, both welcome. While we were eating and exchanging desperate whispers, Sergeant Meyer walked in.

He sat down on an empty bunk, and set a clipboard beside him. "You didn't look so bad out there today. With practice, you might become decent soldiers."

He tapped the papers on the clipboard. "I'm going to give you a chance to find out for yourselves, if you want to. These are recruitment forms. Sign them and you'll be bona fide private mercenaries, with rank and pay and opportunity for advancement."

"For how long would this be?" Pancho asked.

"Ten years." He put his hands on his knees and looked straight at Pancho. "You wouldn't be fighting all of that time, of course. Sometimes months go by without a war."

"And in between times?"

"You would stay in a barracks. Like this one."

"A prisoner."

He shrugged, stood. "Think about it, talk it over. There are advantages."

He dropped the clipboard on the bed where Pancho and I were sitting. "If the idea appeals to you, sign one of these forms. Write above your signature 'Signed without coercion, 17 Diaz 49.'"

"The seventeenth? We've only been here two days?"

That matched with day-after-tomorrow being Saturday, but we were sure we'd been under for a week or even two.

"That's right; the regeneration clinic is very efficient. As you'll find out if you're wounded. They don't like to see soldiers wasting time in bed."

"You don't call this coercion?" Miko said.

"No. No one has to sign."

"We just might live longer if we do," I said.

"I'll be back in ten minutes. Talk it over." He walked away, then stopped at the door. "I was picked up the same way you were, eight years ago. It's not such a bad life. It's a life."

Nobody said anything for a minute. Then one of the military students came over and signed a form. Pancho took the clipboard from him and also signed.

"They can only kill us once, amigo," he whispered.

"This way, we can wait for the best opportunity."

I wasn't sure that that increased our odds very much, but I signed. So did Miko. Eventually all the barracks did.

Meyer came back and picked up the clipboard; rifled through the forms. He nodded but didn't smile. "Usually turns out this way . . . sweet dreams, angels. Heavy day tomorrow."

The first day we had practiced with blank ammunition

and dummy grenades; the second day was for real. I suppose what happened was inevitable; at any rate, Meyer was prepared for it.

The rifles were modern copies of a primitive design: instead of firing whenever you pulled the trigger, you had to cock a sliding bolt between each round. They seemed slow and awkward, and each cassette of ammunition only had ten rounds.

Meyer led us out to the firing range and his corporal handed each of us a cassette. We knew how to operate them from endless drills the day before.

One conscript, who had not said a word in two days, slipped the cassette into place, pointed his rifle at Meyer, and fired. Meyer was wearing body armor, of course; the bullet knocked him back a step but he immediately drew his neurotangler and dropped the man. He quickly scanned the rest of us, then returned the pistol to his holster.

He stood over the fallen man. "Well, well. Corporal?" The other Heller non-com had his own pistol drawn and was looking excited about it. It was a laser, not a 'tangler. "What should we do about this poor cob?"

"Kill him here. Less paperwork than a court martial."

Meyer nodded thoughtfully. "We should make an example of him. He's obviously too stupid to be an infantryman."

"Burn 'im?" He clicked the safety off.

"No. Might as well get some use out of him. We'll use him as meat." The corporal stooped and handcuffed the paralyzed man. Meyer raised his voice. "Tomorrow or Sunday you'll see this man die, our first TDU. With luck, he may save your life, by showing us where enemy fire is coming from." He put his hand on the butt of his pistol. "Any other volunteers?"

None of the rest of us was that desperate, or that resigned. We took our places on the range.

Our targets were man-shaped dummies that popped up at random from trenches 50 to 200 meters downrange. You had one second or less to aim and fire. It was more difficult with real bullets than it had been with blanks. The noise was louder and the rifle butt kicked back against your shoulder in recoil. It was hard not to flinch in anticipation of the impact, which would throw your point of aim off by as much as several meters.

After five or six hours' practice I was pretty good at it, but some people, including Miko, never did get the feel of it. Meyer remarked sarcastically that they were sure to improve when the targets started shooting back.

Then we lined up behind a transparent wall of scarred-up plastic. Ominously, an ambulance floater settled behind us. We put on the heavy steel helmets we'd be wearing in combat.

This was the grenade range. When you got to the front of the line, Meyer would hand you a grenade. You stepped to the other side of the wall, pulled out the safety pin, and threw the grenade at a concrete target thirty meters away. And hit the dirt.

The fragments were deadly out to ten or fifteen meters from where the grenade exploded; some people could barely throw it that far. The plastic wall often rattled with

stray chunks. One man put a couple of deep dents in his helmet and managed to shear off the last joint of his little finger. Meyer said that earned him a one-day vacation and a position in the leading trench, "where he could get lots of practice."

We practiced using the knives as spears, clamped over the end of the rifle barrel. This was supposed to be useful if you ran out of ammunition.

I don't suppose it would be of much use if your enemy still had a bullet or two.

When night fell we had our "graduation exercise": being shot at. We had to crawl down a zigzag trench while somebody fired over our heads with a gatling, a gun that shot a continuous stream of bullets. The trench was full of mud and scarcely a meter deep. The other people were small enough to go on all fours; I had to belly down. It was pretty scary, especially since Meyer was crawling along behind us, throwing grenades. None of them rolled into the trench, though, and we finished the exercise with the same number of people we'd started with.

They gave us a good meal—meat, vegetables, and wine—and let us go to bed early. That would have been fine if I could've slept. I stared at the ceiling until well after midnight, wondering what it was going to be like, wondering whether I would like to see another sundown, wondering what would happen if I actually did have to kill someone. Pancho and Miko and I had talked it over. It would be easy enough simply to miss, shooting at people with the rifle. But what would happen if we had to fight in close quarters? Miko swore he would die before he would kill someone for Her Majesty. I agreed with him. But it was just talk. I was pretty sure I would kill to save my own life; I certainly wouldn't have hesitated during the games, on Earth.

When I finally slept I dreamed about home, but it wasn't a pleasant dream. I had to face a harvest with no more weapons than I was taking to the war. I kept getting attacked by droolers and one-eyes.

I don't think any war makes sense, but this one seemed even more stupid than the ones I'd read about. What was involved was two hills, named 814 and 905, with a small valley between them. Sanctuary was to position 500 soldiers on hill 814; Feder would do the same on 905. They were to fight until one group had possession of both hills.

The valley was about two kilometers wide, filled with a network of deep trenches. Evidently that's where most of the fighting would be done. Neither the rifles nor the gatlings were effective at a two-kilometer range; you could get a bullet that far, but you couldn't aim. So the obvious strategy was to divide your group, leaving part of it to defend the hill, with the other moving from trench to trench toward the enemy's hill. The second bunch had a more dangerous job, it seemed to me, but also would have better opportunity to escape.

About a third of the force were specially-trained men such as snipers, who had heavy rifles of great accuracy; demolition engineers, medical workers, and so forth. The other two-thirds of us were fodder.

They woke us up before dawn and herded us aboard

floaters. We didn't go directly to the hill, but to a "staging area" about ten clicks from it. That was as close as floaters were allowed to go, to prevent aerial observation. We walked the rest of the way, pushing carts full of supplies.

We were about a tenth of Sanctuary's total army. The others had been on the hill for several days, setting things up. The war was to start at noon. We hauled the carts up on the hill at about 11:30, exhausted.

Sergeant Meyer was fresh as a flower after our little hike, not having pushed a cart. "Stow your gear in that bunker," he said, pointing at a hole in the ground, "and fill a few sandbags." Sandbags? He walked briskly away without elaborating.

When Pancho and I hauled our cart around to the bunker, we found two men filling plastic bags with mud. Wet sand, I supposed.

"Here comes the green meat," one of them said. "You got a shovel in that shize?"

I found one. "You two fill; we'll stack." They talked as they built a wall over the hole, two sandbags thick. They were Tanner and Darty, veterans of more than a year of fighting, who had been given the privilege of helping us build our bunker. They already had a large pile of sandbags, and they stacked with speedy efficiency.

The hole was sort of a cave, facing down the hillside. They explained that the sandbag wall could protect us against any amount of rifle or gatling fire, in theory, since a bullet could only penetrate a couple of centimeters. But there had to be ports to shoot through, and a lucky sniper or a rifleman who got too close could get a bullet through the port. If you were shooting out of it at the time, you would most likely get a head wound. Darty showed us a bald crease along the side of his head, and giggled.

The shooting ports were wooden rectangular boxes two sandbags long, open-ended, with enough room to stick a rifle in and move it around a little. The end that pointed outward was covered with a flap of see-through gauze, the same color as the mud. That way, theoretically, no sniper could tell where the port was unless he was looking right at it when you fired in his direction.

More dangerous than bullets was the possibility of somebody getting close enough to toss a grenade or firebomb over the wall. There was a "grenade well," a deep hole, in the middle of the bunker floor. If a grenade came over the top, you could kick it into the well, which should channel all the fragments straight up. If it was a firebomb the only thing to do was try to get out of the bunker as quickly as possible.

The best strategy was not to let anyone get close enough to throw at you.

"But listen," Tanner said, "don't shoot to kill unless you have to."

"Tanner . . ." Darty drawled.

"Shut up, hard case. Shoot for legs, arms, hips, shoulders. Those guys are the same as us, most of them, they just want to live through it. We get real bloodthirsty and they're going to come back the same way. You can't say it isn't true, Darty. I've seen it."

Darty scowled at him.

"Unless you see Heller insignia. Crazy dighters all

wanna die anyhow." A whistle shrilled from above them.
"Ammo call. Let's go."

We clambered, slipping and falling, up to the top of the hill. Captain Forrester and Sergeant Meyer were there, and about a dozen other Heller noncoms. Alegria came out of a bunker beside them, dressed in white, along with nine other white-clad medics, two of them women. She waved at me and Pancho and gave a weak smile.

It got pretty crowded up there, five hundred people slipping around. They herded us into our ten companies, each area marked with a stack of boxes and a company flag. All three of us were Brave Company, though Miko was assigned a different bunker.

When the whistle blew again it was 12:00, time for the war to start. They gave us each 200 rounds of rifle ammunition and five grenades and broke us down into squads of ten. Pancho and I were in D squad, led by an Earthie corporal named O'Connor.

"We've got it lucky today," O'Connor said. "We're one of the defense squads, stay on the hill. Most of the fighting be down in the valley for awhile. You all have bunkers assigned?" We murmured yes.

"Good. We'll spend the next few hours one-on-one-off. Sleep for an hour, keep watch for an hour. How many of you green meat?"

Five of us raised our hands. He sighed. "I always get 'em. Listen. You haven't had much training and I know you aren't ready for this. When it gets hot, you're going to forget everything. One thing you don't dare forget: always shoot to kill. Always shoot to kill. You aren't getting out of this alive unless we can weaken their forces enough to take that hill. You wound some cob, he'll be back shooting at you next week. Always . . ."

From across the valley drifted the faint tap-tap-tap of a gatling being fired.

"Shize. They're bein' cute already. Get into your bunkers, up against the sandbags. I'll be by later."

I looked at Pancho and opened my mouth to say something. Then there was a whipping sound and a flat splash: a bullet made a crater in the mud about three meters away.

I guess I could slide faster than him. I was in the bunker a good three seconds before he fell on top of me.

He wiped mud off his arms. "Thought those things couldn't go this far."

"Guess they just can't aim them. Just trying to throw a scare into us." Succeeding, too; we could hear people shouting and scuffling. My heart was beating fast and Pancho didn't look too tan.

Our own gatling started to return fire. I stuck my rifle through the shooting port and cranked the telescopic sight up to its highest power (the aiming dot fell to the bottom of the field of view and blinked red). Hill 905 was covered with scurrying ants.

Experimentally, I aimed the rifle down the hill, toward the trenches at the base of it. The dot turned yellow and drifted back up to center.

"Don't you think we're going to have enough of that later, amig?" Pancho said. "And your rifle isn't even loaded." As if on cue, a rifle barked in a nearby bunker.

"Save it," someone shouted. "Can't get halfway there."

"Who rests first?" Pancho said.

"You go ahead. I couldn't."

"Me neither. Odds or evens?"

"Evens," I said. He produced two fingers to my three.

"Pleasant dreams," he said, and slipped a cassette into his rifle. Suddenly there was an even greater commotion, as a crowd of men came bustling and sliding down the path by our bunker—armed, helmeted, carrying the small combat packs that held extra ammunition, grenades, and a little food—flying to the temporary safety of the trenches below. The assault squads, over two hundred men.

One man pitched forward and slid ten or fifteen meters until he stopped, unmoving. Another skidded to a halt beside him, looked him over, then shouted "Medic! Concussion!"—and continued down the hill with redoubled speed.

Two male medics rushed down and checked the man quickly, then grabbed him under the arms and carried him up over our bunker, and started lowering him inside. "Here, give us a hand."

We wrestled him down to the floor, gently as possible. One of the medics hopped down and selected a syringe from a case on his belt, and gave him a shot in the arm.

The man groaned and shook his head. The medic unstrapped his helmet and set it next to him. "Where am I . . . what th' shize . . ."

"Bullet bounced off your helmet, knocked you out," the medic said. "Come up to the medic bunker when you can walk." He started to lift himself out. "Or when it stops raining." He followed the other medic uphill, fast.

The man picked up his helmet and ran his fingers over the large dent in the top. Then he gingerly touched the egg-sized swelling that was growing on his crown, and stared at his fingers. "Close one." He swallowed, turned pale.

"You were lucky, amigo."

"I—I've never been hit before."

"How long have you been fighting?" I asked.

"First couple of minutes, that's bad luck. What?"

"I said, 'How many wars have you been in, and not get wounded?'"

"Three shows," he said, touching his head again, winching. "Four months since I signed up."

"Signed up? You don't look like a Heller."

He looked at his fingers again. "At least it's not bleeding—no, I'm from Earth. Too dightin' big for Earth. Made some money in the games and came here to open a liquor store. Got into debt." He shook his head slowly. "Shoulda stayed on Earth, if I knew it'd come to this. Coulda made a fortune. Who cares if people stare."

"We were in the games," I said. "Pancho here was bolo; I was on the quarterstaff."

"Well, damn me." He smiled for the first time, and stuck out his hand. "Jake Newmann, vibroclub."

"I'm Carl—" With a shower of dirt and mud, O'Connor, the little Earthie corporal, slid into the bunker. "What the hell is this?" he said. "Three men in one dightin' bunker and no one on guard?"

"Medical emergency, sir," I said.

"Don't-call-me-sir-I-work-for-a-living," he said auto-

matically. "You're the one that got hit goin' down the hill?"

"Yeah, corporal, one of those gatling rounds. Bounced off my pot, knocked me out."

"So early," he said, shaking his head. "Bad luck." Were all soldiers this superstitious?

He turned to me and Pancho. "You cobs don't really have to look out for another hour or so. The Blues aren't gonna come running across the valley." We were the Reds; both sides wore identical mud-colored uniforms, but we had armbands to keep us from being killed by our own men in close quarters.

"I just don't want you to be slack then. See, they can send snipers around the flanks of our main assault bunch—bet yer bum we're doin' the same—and they could be in an hour or so.

"Most likely, first thing we know of a sniper is when he kills his first man. He's not gonna risk givin' away his position until he's sure of a kill. Everybody's lookin', then maybe we can see the muzzle flash or some smoke."

"S—corporal," I said. "Won't we be able to see him, himself, when he shoots? I mean, there aren't any bunkers down there, are there?"

"No bunkers. But they've got PCU's, portable camouflage units. Sort of like your shooting ports. If you don't see him putting it up, and they're hard to catch, then you won't be able to tell it from the rest of the trench. Not unless you have all the ground memorized, down to the last pebble. That takes a couple of weeks. By then they're only shootin' at night." I was glad the rules of the game didn't allow night-glasses, like we used guarding the harvest at home. Snipers would be too powerful then.

"You cobs green meat?" Jake Newmann asked.

"They sure are," O'Connor said. "Why don't you stay with 'em until your squad gets back—unless you wanna go catch up with 'em."

"Sure thing, corporal, alone in nomanland."

"I'll clear it with Sergeant Dubi; headed up that way. Shouldn't be any problem."

"No place else to go," Jake said. "Besides, we're blood brothers. We were all gladiators, on Earth."

The corporal looked at us strangely. "This must seem pretty tame for you, then." Pancho and I kept our mouths shut. "Just wait," he said softly, and pulled himself up out of the bunker.

"I got a feeling he don't like gladiators much," Jake said. "Why'd you come here? Get disbarred or something?"

We explained to him about *Starschool* and the kidnapping. He wasn't surprised, of course.

"You're sure the ship's left by now?" he said.

Pancho shrugged. "We were reported killed in training, in a remote area. I have the idea that Bruno has done this often enough to know how to cover his tracks."

"And the ship was scheduled to leave yesterday," I added.

"Still, these *Starschool* candies must be pretty sav," Jake said. "Hell, even I'd see a skim job there. You might just see that whole damn ship set down in nomanland tomorrow."

"Never lands," I said. Still, the dean was nothing if he wasn't thorough.

"It may be that you are right, though. Perhaps we have been trained too much out of optimism, out of hoping."

"Sure. Just stay alive. They'll come for you—look at their way. *Starschool*'s way. They're gonna go home and tell your folks that you got wiped on some damn training exercise? They an't. They just an't."

I was fighting against hope. "We signed releases with *Starschool*. They aren't responsible for . . . Oh my God."

"What?" Jake said.

"We signed up. We signed up as mercenaries, and had to say that we'd signed it without coercion."

Jake laughed out loud. "That piece of paper an't worth bumfodder. Not with witnesses around, like your dean. You an't Hellers! You're offworlders—if you contest a contract it goes to the Confederación for adjudication. They won't let it."

"How is it that you know so much about these things?" Pancho asked.

"Look at me!" He spread his arms wide. "I'm a merchant, not a soldier." He laughed, softly but a little crazy. "I had a liquor store on *Earth*, before I had to go to the games. Believe me, I know. I could have been a registered alien, but taking citizenship here gave me a ten percent tax advantage. Shize, I wish I could . . . go back. Better broke and deported than broke and drafted." He laughed again. "But believe me, I know the law. I saw this coming, I saw it for a year or more."

"There's nothing you can do?" I said.

"Live for ten years." Suddenly grim. "Seems less likely than it did yesterday."

"This whole eighteenths planet doesn't make any sense," I said. "Why don't they just . . . well, on Springworld they'd send in a government manager, monitor your standard of living—"

"Oh, my liquor store's got a government manager. And no debts. You can't sue the government here—who would dare to? When I get out, theoretically, I get back my store and my debts. Plus interest. Which ten years at private-and-corporal pay will exactly pay. Which is why I got drafted."

"I thought you said you'd signed up," I said.

"Sure. Like you boys did. I had the choice of enlisting or going to debtors' prison. Nobody gets out of debtors' prison, except they come out in a box."

"But wouldn't you have . . ." Pancho realized what he was saying, but continued: ". . . lived a natural life span?"

"Yeah. Where were you when I needed your advice?" He stood up, leaned on the sandbag wall for support.

"Why don't all the unwilling ones simply refuse to fight?" asked Pancho. "Just sit down or something?"

Jake laughed. "It'd be a toss-up to see who'd kill you first. There are a lot of Hellers out there that'd love to do the job. Some draftees, too. They start out hating it and end up loving it. Seen it happen lots of times."

I shuddered, remembering the arena. There were dark sides to every man.

"I'd better go get my rifle," said Jake. It was still in

the mud where he'd fallen. "Before it gets dangerous out there."

"Stay here and rest, amigo. I'll get it."

"Pancho—" The gatling was still tapping away.

"Before it gets dangerous," he said, lifting himself out of the bunker. He was fast about it.

"Thanks." Jake took the rifle and started cleaning it carefully with a rag.

"Like I say, you boys may only have to last a day or two, before they come get you. Just keep your heads down and don't do anything stupid." He waved at the shooting ports. "Put all your cassettes on the wooden shelf there; all facing the same way. You're gonna have to reload in the dark. Put a couple grenades up there, too. Use 'em when you don't want to give away the position of the bunker at night. Try not to throw 'em in the direction of the bunker below."

"Keep your sights clean; keep your gun clean. Might save your life."

"Do you shoot to kill?" I asked him.

"I just shoot. Let the bullet decide." He looked thoughtful. "If a certain Blue sergeant comes up the hill, though, I'm going to aim very careful."

"Do you think they will be coming up the hill tonight?" Pancho asked.

"Probably not. My second show they did; took every dightin' man off their hill and tried a mass attack. Didn't work."

"Usually they'll just get a few snipers down there. Each one of them has two or three PCU's; that way they can keep shooting at us from different angles. Night-time, they might try to move some sappers in, sneak up and drop grenades in some bunkers. Likewise, after it gets dark, we'll send a squad of commandos down after the snipers. That's nasty work. Have to be real quiet about it. Sometimes the commandos goin' down meet the sappers comin' up. That's a bloody mess."

"Think they'll make us be commandos?" I asked.

"No. Those're usually Hellers, or other real mercenaries. Like I say, they have to be quiet. That's knife work." I shuddered.

He rubbed his face with both hands, hard. "Wonder if I oughta go see the medics."

"He said—"

"Yeah. But I sure hate doctors." He put his helmet on his head and flinched. "Guess I better. They might send me down the hill for a couple days."

He pulled himself up out of the bunker and there was a sound like a hard slap. "Oh," he said softly, and slid back down.

I caught him before he hit the ground and eased him down on his back. I heard Pancho gasp.

His skin was grey with shock and a dark red stain was spreading on the front of his shirt. He was staring at it. He said one word: "Didn't." Then he gurgled terribly and his neck went loose, his head dropped back to the ground, his eyes were dead.

"*Dios*," Pancho said. "*Mierda*."

My hands were shaking so I could hardly manage the slider on his shirt. When it opened I tasted acid vomit,

stood up, and choked it back. I was not going to stick my head over the parapet just to empty my jumpy stomach.

The center of his chest was a hole big enough to put my fist in. Mostly red and white and yellow. Splinters of bone. It looked like the bullet had smashed right through his heart.

"Medic," Pancho yelled, then yelled again, louder.

"What is it," a voice drifted down.

"We—we have a dead man."

"Are you sure he's dead?"

Pancho looked at him for an instant and jerked his head away. "He's dead all right."

"Just a minute."

We waited. I took the rag out of his pocket and covered his face with it. That made it a little easier. They say that when medical students do autopsies the first thing they do is remove the face.

"Hey you." The voice wasn't any closer. "Leave him be. We'll come get him after dark."

That was jolly. "Should . . . should we put him outside?"

"I don't think so," Pancho said. "Why don't we both stand guard for a while?"

"Good idea." I stepped over the body and sat down to look through the gunport.

"What a terrible thing," Pancho whispered. "He—" Someone jumped into the bunker behind us. I grabbed my rifle and spun around.

"Don't shoot, bumhole." It was O'Connor. He toed the body. "Same guy." He peeked under the rag. "I'll be damned. I will be damned."

I thought that was likely but didn't say anything. "What happened?"

"He was going up to see the medics. Maybe it was a sniper."

"Naw. That's a fifty-caliber wound." He turned the body partway over; there was a circle of blood on the back of its shirt.

"See, there's the entrance wound," he said with detachment. "Higher than the exit wound. Sniper, it'd be lower." He let the body drop. "Better hope they don't have a sniper with a fifty."

"Just one of those random gatling rounds," I said.

He stood up and wiped his hands on his shirt. "Sometimes a cob just runs outta luck. Twice! Would you—"

Two medics scrambled down to the edge of the bunker. "You guys wanna hand up that meatball? Goddamn lieutenant says we need the parts."

"Don't need no goddamn parts," the other one said.

"Listen, I'm a corporal," O'Connor said.

"You're a dightin' fleet commander, I don't care, just give us that dightin' meatball so we can get back to the dightin' bunker!"

I grabbed one arm and O'Connor grabbed the other. A dead body is heavier than a live one. The medics took it without thanking us and dragged him away, the toes making parallel furrows in the mud.

O'Connor kicked mud over the pool of blood and sat down with his back against the sandbags. He lit up a weed and offered us the box. I refused but Pancho took one.

For a minute we sat and stared at where the body had been. The gatling chattered softly and every now and then there was a wet sound when a bullet hit nearby.

"They must have a ton of ammo," O'Connor said.

"Why aren't we shooting back?" I asked.

"Well, probably because somebody thinks that *they* want us to. To use up ammo. That would mean an assault tonight, big one, human wave attack. So we're saving ammo. But I'm just guessing."

He took a deep drag. "That would be nice."

"A *human wave attack*?" Pancho said.

"Get it over with, one way or another. Rather fight in the trenches, though. Mobility."

Down in the valley there was a sudden pair of shots, then several grenade blasts.

"First contact," O'Connor said, an edge of excitement in his voice. There was a short volley of rifle fire.

He stood up and ground his weed out on our floor. "Better go to the command post." He started up, then turned around. "Say, either of you cobs good with a knife?"

"No," I lied.

"Never used one," Pancho said.

He nodded and hauled himself out; walked away without hurrying.

"That man is more dangerous to us than any Blue," Pancho said.

I was thinking. "Wait. Suppose he did send us out on a commando raid. That would give us all night to slip away—and when we didn't come back they'd probably think we were killed."

"The only flaw in your logic is that we probably *would* be killed." He looked through the gunport. "I wonder if they made it halfway."

I used my telescopic sight, scanning. There was a spurt of white smoke and mud, followed by the sharp report of a grenade. I focussed on it; the aiming dot was close to the bottom but wasn't blinking red.

Suddenly a couple of dozen soldiers jumped out of a trench and started running in our direction. They had blue armbands; their rifles had bayonets.

"Open fire!" someone shouted, and the bunkers around us immediately started firing. I aimed high and squeezed the trigger—the rifle was loud inside the bunker—then cocked another round in and shot again.

"Lead th' motherdighters! Bullet takes a second to get there." We didn't seem to be having much effect. Then one of the soldiers fell to his knees, dropped his rifle and started crawling back.

Out of a trench some twenty meters in front of them, Red soldiers popped up and started firing and throwing grenades. Several of the Blues fell immediately, but the rest started shooting back as they ran. Someone shot off a signal gun, and a bright green star glowed over their position. Calling reinforcements, I guessed, but both sides would see it.

About half of the Blue soldiers made it to the trench, jumping in with their bayonets.

"Hold fire!"

Without looking up from his gunsight, Pancho said, "I'm just as glad that we are here and they are there."

"Wish it would stay that way. You shoot anybody?"

"No, I aimed high."

"Me, too." I winced as a grenade went off in the trench. That seemed self-defeating, at close quarters.

A louder shot, almost as loud as the ones from other bunkers, stood out from the noise of the battle, and someone on the top of the hill screamed. A sniper. "Now we're in for it," I said.

"Did you see anything?"

"No." The person he had hit was shouting for a medic. I wondered whether I would have gone to help him, if I were dressed in white instead of mud. They weren't supposed to shoot at medics.

I had a sick vision of Alegria having to run out and tend the man, exposed, her life depending on the sniper's respect for the rules of the game. There weren't any women fighters, though, so maybe the female medics only worked under cover.

There was another shot, that seemed to come from a different direction, but apparently no one was hit. A couple of seconds later, the bunker above us started firing furiously; they must have seen the shot. They threw a grenade but it fell short, narrowly missing the bunker below.

"Do you see it?" Pancho asked. I could see mud splashing where the bullets hit, but that was all.

Then there was another shot, and this time we could hear the bullet whirr over our heads. The bunker above stopped firing. Sensible. Why ask for trouble?

"There!" Pancho said.

I thought I'd seen a little flicker of motion, too. "Just left of that white rock?"

"That's it."

After a moment I said, "Are you going to shoot?"

"It's not my war . . . it's yours, amigo?"

"No." But staring at that spot, I started thinking about Morality as Arithmetic, or vice versa. What if he lived to kill ten more soldiers, for my not pulling the trigger? I would be responsible for all ten, in one sense.

But if he saw the flash or smoke and I missed, and he aimed back . . . I felt more like a coward than a moralist.

"Do you think what Jake said made sense?" Pancho asked.

"About the dean running in and saving us? I wouldn't put any real money on it."

"I fear I wouldn't either. Should we volunteer for this commando thing?"

I thought for a minute. "Not yet. They might get suspicious. I would, anyhow."

"Wait and see what happens, I suppose. That battle appears to be over." There was no more shooting there. Seven dead or wounded men lay between the two trenches. A white-clad medic (with a blue armband) walked from body to body. How many more were in the trench?

There was no more sniper fire. We assumed they were waiting for dark, or for somebody to show himself. I had to pee in the worst way, but decided that stepping outside would be the worst way.



Pancho stood guard while I tried to sleep. I almost wished O'Connor was here. Did that battle mean, because it involved so few men, that we wouldn't have the human wave attack? Or could there have been three or four hundred more men stalking through the trenches? It gave me cold sweat to realize that that would make sense: sending a dozen men up to divert the enemy's attention, while the main body moved in for slaughter. No, there would've been more shots. Unless they'd rushed with bayonets. But we had two hundred men out there, some-

where. How many were in the battle? Nothing like two hundred. And the trenches were a complicated maze; that's how the snipers managed to work their way in undetected. If two men could sneak through, could five hundred? It didn't seem likely. It didn't seem impossible, either.

I woke suddenly to the sound of gunfire. "It's down in the first trench," Pancho said. "Not the slit trench, the first real trench." The slit trench was a shallow straight one, as opposed to the deep zigzags that scored the valley.

I looked through the gunport and could see wisps of

smoke rising from the trench. Was this the first rank of the human wave? It wasn't quite dark yet.

"See any people?"

"No," he said, "not yet."

The firing stopped abruptly. Then dozens of soldiers came pouring out of the trench—with red armbands, to our relief. "Maybe they caught the snipers," I said.

"At least they're coming back. It will make the night easier."

I stretched, then felt a sharp pain. "Lots of targets now. Think I'll go water the grass."

"Me next," he said.

The sanitation facilities were one large can, about two hundred liters, across the path. The returning soldiers scrambled by as I stood there relieving myself, some of them with entertaining comments. Some were bandaged and bleeding; some had to be carried. They had got two snipers.

I traded places with Pancho and watched it grow dark. When I could barely see through the sight, I heard someone approach the bunker and slide in. "O'Connor?"

"Right. You both awake?"

"Yes," Pancho said.

"Here." He handed me a heavy bundle; same to Pancho. "Pistol and trench knife."

"Gladiators have to be brave, right?" We didn't say anything. "Well, this is a job for brave men."

"What sort of job?"

"You two are going after snipers tonight. Crawl through the first few rows of trenches and kill them silently."

"I thought the assault squads cleaned them out."

"They'll be back. They love the night."

"Corporal," Pancho said, "these pistols aren't silent, are they?"

"No. You don't want to use them except in an emergency. Take a few hand grenades; they're better."

"Here's what we're going to do." I liked that 'we.' "At 22:25 we'll fire a double star shell. Two bright flares. As soon as they burn out, get out of the bunker and down the path. You have five minutes of darkness."

"Unless the enemy shoots a flare."

"True. In which case you freeze, as you were trained. It's really quite hard to see a man if he doesn't move. In addition, you'll find a camouflage kit on the pistol belt. Rub the cream all over your face and hands and the back of your neck." He rattled something. "These pills both improve night vision and darken the whites of your eyes. Take one now." We did.

"How do we know when it's 22:25?" I asked.

"You don't have watches? I'll throw a pebble into your bunker. If you hear a whistle instead—" He put a whistle to his lips and blew softly. "—that means it's called off."

"Why would they call it off?" Pancho asked.

"Need you more here; signs of a mass attack. Did your training cover how to kill a man with a knife?"

"They showed us." We didn't practice on each other.

"For this sort of thing the best way is to come up from

behind, put your free hand over his mouth and nose, and then either go for the throat or the kidneys. Throat is an easier target but the kidneys'll stop him faster. You, with your big hands, you might just choke the dighter until he's unconscious, then finish him quietly."

"Noise is the main thing. It's likely you've got another sniper nearby. Maybe some sappers, too. Best to have one person stand watch while the other goes for the kill."

"But surely he will be hard to surprise," Pancho said. "Surely he is expecting something like this."

"Maybe not. We're sending out a TDU, one of your group who fired at the Field First Sergeant. He will be outfitted for commando work. But one of his boots squeaks, ever so slightly. After they kill him, they will be less watchful." Carefully shielding the flame, he lit a weed. "Also, it's best to attack while there's firing going on. Every now and then the gatling up on the top of the hill will spray the trenches with random fire. That's a good time to strike."

"There's another gatling covering the break in the barbed wire. He will hold his fire when you go through." He smoked for a few seconds. "Coming back. It's safest to wait until dawn. Wait in the slit trench. Hold up an armband and wave it. The gatling will let you through."

"But what about snipers?"

"There won't be any left, not if you do your job. But the gatling will lay down a field of fire, just in case."

"Is everybody down there a Blue?" I asked.

"Yes. We have some units in no man's land, but they're all over by the other hill. If you hear or see a group of men, it's probably a Blue sapper squad. Throw a couple of grenades at them, from hiding. If they're Reds, they're disobeying orders." Severe punishment, I thought. "Any other questions?"

"Just this," Pancho said. "Why us? This sounds like the sort of job you would give to experienced soldiers."

"I only have five mercenaries in my squad. I want to save them." He turned as if to go, then said: "Well, that's not the whole story. I shouldn't tell you this. You must have done something to get the Field First pissed. He asked me to put you on a dangerous assignment. Do well and you might get on his good side."

I wasn't sure being on his good side would be much of an improvement.

"Your friend, the other one, has a similar assignment."

That would be Miko. "He didn't say why?" I asked.

"I've told you too much. But no, he didn't. Good luck." He left.

We listened to him tiptoe away. "Not very promising," Pancho said.

"Sounds like they want to get rid of the evidence," I said. "Wonder what they have lined up for Alegria and Miko."

"Should we desert them?"

I hadn't thought of it that way. "We must. There's no chance for any of us unless we can get word to the Confederación."

"I suppose." I heard him settle in. "Wake me when you're tired."

I went back to the gunport and watched the scenery grow slightly more clear, as the pill took effect. But I was dazzled whenever a star shell burst. There wasn't too much action. The gatling down by the wire fired a few rounds once, and a sniper returned fire, but his bullet just ricocheted off the gun's metal shield. One flare caught a Blue in the open, and though several people fired at him, he managed to roll to the safety of a trench. His rifle looked larger than ours, with a heavy 'scope and a bipod near the muzzle: a sniper. So we would have at least one to contend with, or avoid.

O'Connor had given me an idea. If necessary, I could choke a sniper into unconsciousness, and still stop short of killing him. Though it would be better simply to sneak around them.

Pancho woke up on his own, and in whispers we outlined a preliminary plan.

Nomanland was a rectangle about two kilometers long by one wide. The longest close trench was the third one out, which would take us to within twenty meters of the

perimeter of nomanland. We would go straight to the third trench and follow it all the way to our right; then get out and run for it. As far as we could tell, there wasn't even a strand of barbed wire there, though there might be alarms. They said that putting one foot outside of the perimeter was desertion; automatic death penalty. Maybe that was enough to keep most people inside, where the death penalty was at least delayed.

I don't think I slept for more than five minutes at a time, with flares and gunfire and terrible dreams waking me up. I was mortally afraid, and so was Pancho: in the light of one flare I saw him staring down at nomanland,



his jaw muscles bunched with tension, rivulets of sweat beading on the dark camouflage paste.

Finally the double star shone, and a pebble rattled off the top of our parapet. We strapped on our pistols and knives and, as soon as the flares winked out, scrambled out of the bunker and made our way down the path as quickly and quietly as possible. Going through the barbed wire, I almost had a heart attack when the gatling opened up. But he wasn't shooting at us; it was support fire, evidently, to keep the enemy's heads down.

Pancho and I had both done a lot of hunting, so moving quietly was second nature. I felt terribly exposed, though, as we crept over the ten meters of open ground between the slit trench and the first of the main trenches. There were no flares, luckily, and we lowered ourselves into the trench without incident. We had to go to the left about a hundred meters, to get to the cross-trench.

We came to within about three meters of a sniper before we saw him. He was in a sort of alcove cut in the side of the trench, and he seemed totally absorbed in his business, luckily for us.

We couldn't risk sneaking behind him, though. I made a patting motion to signal Pancho to stay put, and in a couple of quick steps I was on the man. I clamped both hands around his throat and leaned into him, jamming him up against the wall so his thrashing wouldn't make too much noise. The only sound he made was a faint squeak, like a kitten. Eventually he stopped struggling, and went limp. I gave him a few more seconds and lowered him to the ground. I slipped the bolt out of his rifle and put it in my pocket, then motioned to Pancho.

There was another sniper just before the cross-trench. We started to handle him the same way, but when I grabbed his neck it was cold and slimy. He fell back against me and just at that moment a star shell went off and I stared at the jagged hole in his head. I let go of him instinctively and he fell with a heavy noise. We waited for an army to pounce on us but nothing happened.

We slipped into the cross-trench and moved as fast as we could. If our gatling opened up we'd have no place to hide; they were right in line. There was a dead man in the middle of the trench, with a red armband. Maybe the TDU who had been sent out as a decoy. We didn't stop to investigate.

We hesitated at the intersection, where the cross-trench met the second trench, and that was a lucky thing. We heard footsteps. Several men were coming from our left.

They couldn't see us yet, because of the sawtooth pattern of the trenches (this gave you some protection from grenade blasts and prevented one squad, or one man with a gatling, from being able to hold an entire trench under fire).

We crossed quickly and flattened ourselves against the walls. Pancho had a grenade in his hand; I took one out, too. So much for the moral equation. But we didn't have to use them. They came within a few meters but never even looked our way. They turned down the cross-trench and moved quickly away from us. Six-man sapper squad.

Then a flare popped and the gatling opened up. Pancho and I jumped back into the crossroads and took shelter.

The sapper squad was caught in the passageway. There were a couple of horrible screams and one man called out for a medic. The gatling kept firing until he stopped.

I wondered about Miko being out in all this, too. He couldn't be much better off than we were. He might even be alone. I didn't wonder very long, though. He'd have to take care of himself.

When the last flare died down we continued up the cross-trench. I fought the impulse to sprint. We'd seen how noise carried.

Third trench, right turn, half-a-klick to freedom. It was less likely that we'd run into snipers here, but we used the same caution: Pancho leading, he'd sneak forward a few meters and stop; then I, the larger target, would follow, watching him for hand signals.

We got to the end of the trench without any trouble. Evidently both armies were staying close to home tonight, good luck. We had a whispered conference and decided to stay in the trench until the next flare; when that died away we'd make a run for it.

It seemed to take forever, but finally a flare popped and we tensed for the run. In the lurid dancing light we could see a warning sign above the trench:

WARNING

YOU ARE NEARING THE PERIMETER.

TURN BACK NOW. PENALTY FOR
LEAVING NOMANLAND IS DEATH.

The flare went out and we scrambled up and started running. After a few steps I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I barely had time to wonder about it when it got suddenly more and more intense, and brought me to my knees. Pancho stumbled to the ground beside me.

"My chest," he croaked. "Dios!"

"Me, too. Have to go back."

"Back?" He didn't have it figured out.

"Come on." As we crawled back the way we had come, the pain diminished, finally disappearing as we tumbled back into the trench.

"I think I understand," he whispered, panting. "They put something in our bodies."

"Yeah. And there's some kind of signal generated by the perimeter, sets it off."

"I'm sure it would have killed us if we'd gotten much closer." He shook his head. "What now?"

"Like Jake said. Stay alive for a couple of days. Then a couple of days more, I guess. Right now we have to stay alive till dawn."

"This is a safe place, here."

"I don't know. The longer we stay here, the more Blues we'll have to pass to get back. Assuming they've sent more than two snipers and six sappers."

"And if they haven't, we're safe anywhere," he said, somehow with a mix of hope and sarcasm in his voice.

I stood up. "We'll get back half as fast, twice as quiet."

"And try not to kill?"

"I guess—damn!"

"What is it?"

"I didn't take the bolt out of that dead sniper's rifle. When the one I choked wakes up, he'll just switch weapons."

"If he stays. If I were him, I'd start easing back toward my own hill."

We retraced our path in total silence, and didn't meet anyone. There were only five sappers' bodies in the corridor, but we found the sixth on the floor of the first trench. The dead sniper still had a bolt in his rifle; I removed it. The one I'd choked had disappeared.

I started to go over the wall but Pancho grabbed my leg. "No, amigo," he whispered. "We're safer from our own fire down here than in the slit trench."

He was right. We settled into a niche there and all hell broke loose.

There were several muffled grenade blasts, all within a few seconds. Then sporadic rifle fire and the deeper, faster banging of pistols. People were screaming, shouting orders, calling for medics. Flares popped. There were people running all over the hill.

"Sappers," Pancho whispered.

Four men were running down the path, shooting back at our people with pistols. They ran through the barbed wire opening unscathed; they must have gotten the gatling bunker. They jumped the slit trench and ran toward us. Rifle bullets spit all around them.

They would hit the first trench a few meters from where we were. There was no way they could miss us.

"God forgive me," I muttered, and pulled the pin from a grenade, and hurled it at them.

My aim was good but my timing was bad. The grenade hit one of them full in the chest. It bounced in front of him and, without breaking stride, he kicked it right back at us. It bounced once and fell in the trench between me and Pancho. It was close enough that you could hear the fuse sputtering.

I could have been a hero and thrown my body over it, to save Pancho. Or I could have been smart and jumped away, flattening with my feet pointed toward it (which is what Pancho did). Instead I was stupid, and picked it up.

My memory of it is in excruciating slow motion. As soon as I picked it up I knew I'd done the wrong thing. Then as I swung to throw it back at the advancing sappers, I knew I'd done the second wrong thing; I should have just tossed it down the trench a few meters, and the zigzag would have protected us.

It must have detonated about a meter away from my hand. It didn't hurt, just a big sting and a blinding flash, and I fell back on to the floor of the trench, right on top of Pancho.

I heard the sappers jump into the trench and then I heard someone cock a pistol, and someone else say Don't waste it he's dead. Then I heard the gatling start up and slowly fade away.

"Carl! Wake up! *Dios!*" I woke up to a sudden universe of pain: my chest and face felt like they had been chewed off and nailed back on. My right arm felt like it was being deep-fried.

Only one eye worked. I used it to look at my arm and almost fainted again. Thumb and forefinger were gone; middle finger was broken off and swung loose, held by a scrap of flesh. The whole arm looked like a skinned animal that had been flayed alive. Spurting blood.

Pancho was working on a tourniquet. Blood stopped spurting as I watched. "I have to go get help," he said. "Hold on to this knife." He guided my left hand to the trench knife he had used as a pivot for the tourniquet. "Don't try to sit up. You've got one eye out of its socket, I don't know what to do about that."

My mouth was so dry I couldn't talk. I tried to tell him to go on, I was dead, don't risk himself and a medic. But he was gone. I fell asleep again. Did Pancho give me a shot?

The next thing I saw was Alegria's face. She smiled. "You're going to be all right, Carl." I was in the aid station on the top of the hill. "You'll be able to use the hand in a week or so." My vision was blurred; I touched the bad eye and it was sore, but there.

"They put the eye back in. You looked pretty creepy when they brought you up." Her voice was shaking. I wondered if she'd cried.

"How's Pancho?"

"Hardly a scratch. And you can thank him for finding your thumb and finger, while you were waiting for the medics. You were lucky it . . . it all came off in one piece. That made the bone graft easy."

"Hardly a scratch? He was hit, then."

"He was hurt a little when that grenade you were playing with went off. Just some scalp cuts, though; he didn't even notice them."

My senses were starting to come back. "Are we alone?" I whispered.

"Yes, we are."

"Look, they'll be sending me back to the main hospital, won't they?"

"I suppose . . ."

"I can escape! Find my way back to the Confederation."

"It's not that easy. Miko tried last night and they—"

I heard a door open.

"Can he stand up?" said a voice I couldn't place.

"I don't know, sir," Alegria said. "I don't think he should."

"Have him try." I rolled over on one elbow and levered myself up, then sat up on the bed. Oddly, only my eye hurt.

The voice belonged to Captain Forrestor. He was standing there with a pistol in his hand, loosely at his side. Behind him were Pancho and Miko, their hands tied behind their backs, and Sergeant Meyer, behind them with a rifle.

I lowered my feet to the ground and stood up, groggy. Alegria held on to my good arm. "What's going on?" I said. "Sir?"

"You know what's going on. I'm sorry the surgeon wasted so much time on you last night. You'll die today."

"You and Private Bolivar did willfully try to desert last night. The sensors implanted in your chests identified you. If someone had awakened me I would have had you shot, and saved some trouble." He looked at Meyer sharply.

"In addition, there is the matter of Private Riley's attempt at desertion last night. That he got farther than either of you is only a tribute to his ability to withstand the pain of the sensors." Captain Forrestor half turned, gave Miko a cold glance. "Private Riley managed to reach the perimeter and deactivate a portion of the warning network. If he had kept going there is no doubt he could have escaped. Foolish as it may seem, he chose to return. If he had simply taken the woman he would have had no trouble. It was only when he attempted to rescue you that he was apprehended. Stupid loyalty. Pity they didn't kill him."

I looked at Miko. He averted his eyes and it was only then that I noticed the thin line of plastiflesh that covered half his face. His nose had been rebuilt.

"Therefore, I have good and substantial reason to believe that a conspiracy to escape exists among the four of you. I have but one reasonable course of action. You are all condemned to die." He raised his pistol. "Sergeant?"

Meyer leaned his rifle against the wall and picked up a thick roll of surgical tape. He bound Alegria's hands behind her back and bound mine in front, the good one against the one in a plastic cast. Then he taped everyone's mouths shut.

"Take them down to the wire and dispose of them with the gatling. Make a little speech first. We'll get *some* use out of them."

Meyer pushed us, not too roughly, out the door, and followed us down the path to the bottom of the hill. Miko was beside me.

I felt stupid for all the things I had thought about him. There were things I had to tell him, important things. I'd never get the chance. I caught his eye and, somehow, I felt he understood.

"It's no consolation," said Meyer softly, "but I don't like doing this."

Pancho had worked a corner of the tape loose on his shoulder. "But you *are* doing it," he said, mumbling.

"To save my skin. I didn't wake that bumhole up last night because I figured any bumhole who can sleep through a sapper attack must really need his sleep."

"You might as well know the whole story. He got a request—not an order, a request—to send you four back to base camp. It seems some Confederación official made an enquiry about our recruiting procedures. About the four of you, specifically. There will be a hearing. He would rather you weren't alive to testify, which is why you had such



interesting jobs yesterday. Your trying to escape only made it easier for him."

"We were kidnapped—so were you! Can't you see that setting us free could mean *your* freedom?"

"No. It would mean a bullet in the brain. Besides, we were *legally* kidnapped. I think he could solve the whole thing in court, in Confederación court. But he's an impulsive bumhole, and the Confederación scares him shizless—what the hell-is that?"

We were about halfway down the hill. There was a low warbling sound, full of nervous subsonics.

I had never seen a Confederación police cruiser before. A shiny black inverted bowl half the size of the hill we stood on. It settled down over the first three rows of trenches, gently as a dust mote. The top-mounted gigawatt laser swivelled to point toward us.

"WE DO SUBPEONA FIVE INDIVIDUALS: CAPTAIN HARVEY FORRESTOR, SPICELLE; ALEGRIA SALDANA, SELVA; FRANCISCO BOLIVAR, SELVA; CARL BOK, SPRINGWORLD; AND MIKO RILEY, EARTH. COME FORWARD." It had the voice of a minor god.

"Shoot the dighters!" Forrestor was on top of the hill, waving his pistol. He fired; the bullet sang over our heads.

Meyer slammed a round home and pointed his rifle at the officer. "Drop it, Captain! They'll fry us all!"

He kept the pistol pointed at us for a second and then let it drop from his fingers. "Ramirez! Tulo! Sandiwell! Someone *do* something!"

All of the camp was staring from behind their bunkers. Nobody raised a weapon. "Guess I better go with you," Meyer said. "Come along, sir."

Keeping his eyes and rifle on Forrestor, he said, "Morrison. Would you set these people free?"

After announcing that the war was temporarily sus-



pended, the police vessel took us aboard, and in a few minutes we were back at the spaceport in the capitol city. Guards armed with tanglers escorted us to a floater, and we were taken to a tall building in the center of the city. Down a lift to a corridor, down the corridor to an office. In the office was a huge desk, bare except for four pieces of paper—our enlistment forms—and three people: a Heller with an ornate uniform that featured five stars, Dean M'bisa—and B'oosa!

The dean flinched when he saw me. B'oosa said: "Still have all your arms and legs, Carl. I'm surprised."

The general said, "Who are you?"

"Sergeant Meyer, sir. I had to escort the—"

"I only asked who you were. You may leave." He turned to us. "Sit down. You remain standing, Captain."

He waited for us to sit. "Captain Forrestor, do you realize you are guilty of a profound violation of the law?" The captain just stared. "In connection with the recruitment of these four individuals?"

"Sir, I bought them from—"

"Silence! I don't know how they got into your camp, and I don't care." With a well-manicured forefinger he pushed the documents two centimeters toward Forrestor. "This is what I'm talking about."

"They signed without coercion, sir."

"Well and good." He leaned forward and his voice dropped almost to a whisper. "But they are minors, Forrestor. Minors. They can't sign such an agreement without their parents' permission."

He turned to the two black men. "In this case, Dr. M'bisa, who is acting *in loco parentis*.

"It may not please you to know that we have already hanged one man in conjunction with this . . . terrible scheme. The sergeant who supplied these four to you. He kidnapped them, reported them killed in training, and col-

lected a part of the insurance as well as an enlistment fee from you.

"You will have a chance to defend your own role in this affair, at a general court martial this afternoon. You are dismissed."

"But . . . General . . . everybody—"

"You aren't helping your case, Captain. Dismissed." The guards escorted him out the door.

When they were gone, the General said, "His confusion might be understandable. On his world, people reach their majority at 18. On Hell, it's 25."

"Of course," M'bisa said.

"So it isn't a Confederación matter at all, though we are of course grateful for the help of Confederación officials in resolving it. The rest may be taken care of within the structure of the Universal Code of Military Justice." You could hear the capitals.

"Unless we should choose to press the matter," M'bisa said.

"Let me be frank." He indicated us with a sweep of his hand. "It happens that the same document is used for enlistment in the mercenary forces and enlistment in our military school system. Minors may sign the latter."

"But it's difficult to get out of, I assume," B'oosa said.

He nodded slowly. "Even if this is desired by the parents. The natural parents."

Dean M'bisa stood up, his posture and face showing his age. "I think we understand each other, General. Good day."

"Good day, citizens."

B'oosa had seen the whole thing, from behind a snowbank. He stamped out a message in the snow, in pan-Swahili. Not too many Hellers understand the language, but most Confederación employees do. A weather satellite picked it up, and he was rescued by the same police vessel that rescued us.

I spent a day in a Hell hospital, where Earthie doctors worked on my hand and face. Then we went back to Starschool and left Hell behind. Dr. M'bisa announced that the planet had been dropped from the school's itinerary.

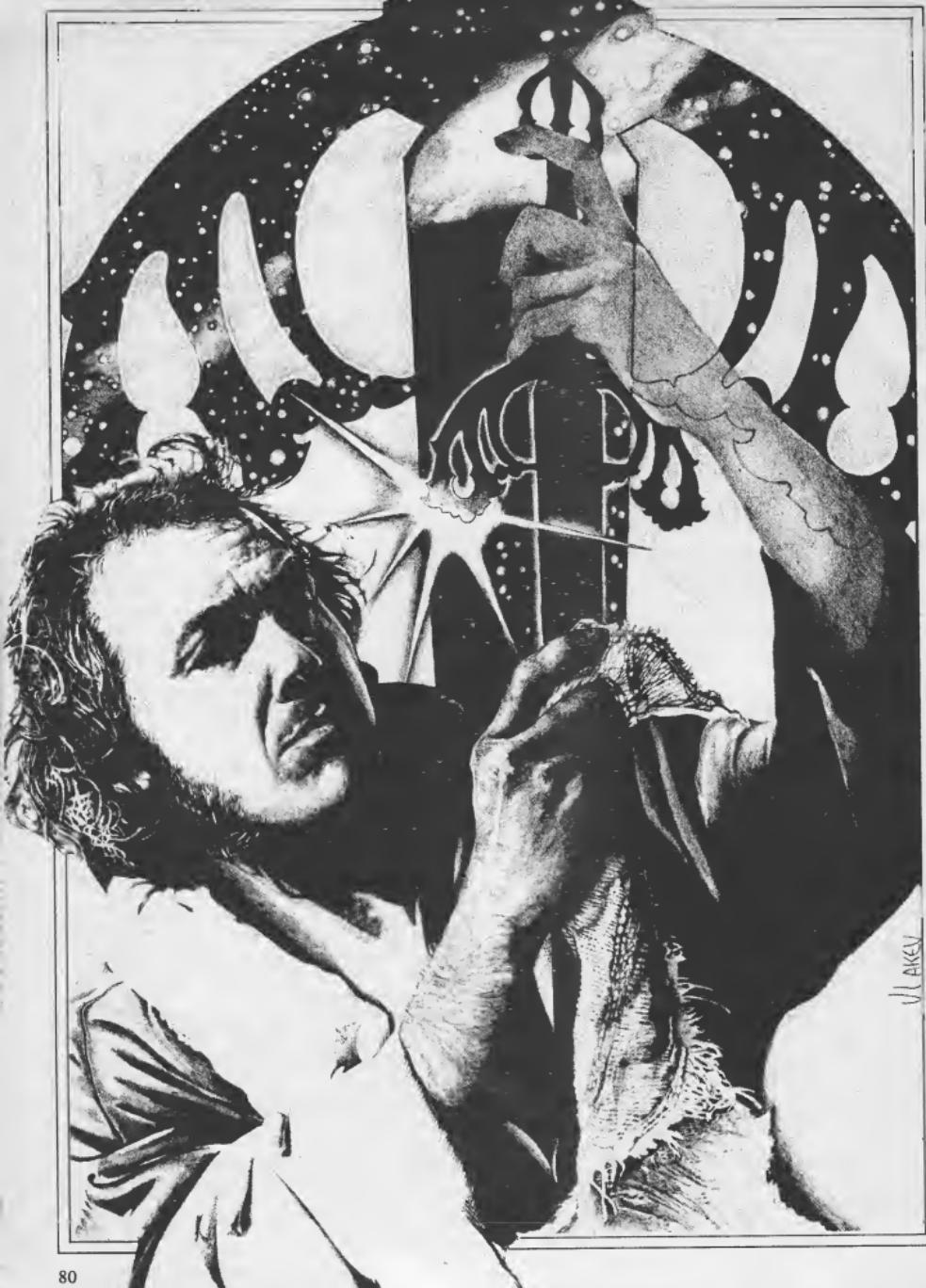
What did I learn there?

It's hard to sort out. I was already pretty well-educated in fear and pain and exhaustion. The animals were no stranger or more ferocious than the ones at home. Except the human animals.

I guess what finally comes out of it is something cold and dry, like The Perseverance of Institutions, or The Imperceptibility of Man.

Those Hellers were not less human than I was.

What keeps me up at night is the thought that they might be more human.



V. L. AKERLY

DAVIDSON, SHADOW SLAYER

Swords against Shadows...the Shadows could kill

By John Kelly

Illustrated by Val Lakey

□ The black-cloaked figure dashed down the crowded streets, down a passage that a wedge of hooded gunmen forced open before him. Speed was everything. He barely heard the hissing of their sonic rifles; he didn't care how they got him down there. Speed was everything.

No, they weren't killing, just firing into the air to scare the crowds, to move them. All the better.

The streets grew less crowded as they entered the old section, then empty when they reached the gateway. They bounded down the ramps to the old, dusty rocketfield, Davidson still just steps behind his wedge of guards. The gunmen led him down the plastic-grate boardwalks, through the maze of cruisers and transports. They fled past the vast, useless Citymovers, with their towering, decaying silver hulls, and past sleeker ships for smaller crowds, still too big to have a use anymore. The ships bounced up and down before Davidson's eyes as he pounded onward. Then suddenly they were there: at a small, golden Needle, a sharply pointed, one-man ship already trembling with slowly growing power. The guards ran onward, shedding their guns and their masks, to lose themselves in the maze of small ships.

"Good luck," said a shorter man in a tapered grey coat. He shook Davidson's hand and took his cloak.

"I, um—" He looked into Davidson's eyes and stopped trying to speak.

Davidson climbed through the hatch on the Needle and was locked in for the journey. The Techies pulled away the giant clamps which had held the Needle in place and mechanically pulled the man in the coat away to a safe distance. The whine of the Needle's engines rose to a scream; then suddenly the Needle shot skyward.

Davidson had time to think, before the gas numbed him. He had a chance to review the escape plan one last time.

Everyone loved the irony. The irony! Hide him at the homeland, in the heart of everything. Davidson wished it was less ironic, and more obscure.

Ancient history: there was once only one Earth, back in "modern" times before the Great Expansion.

Political history: as if the Four Rebellions and the Great Repression hadn't been enough, the pirates of the Drassen Terror had left the center of the inhabited galaxy a vast ruin. The first Earth was one of the hardest-hit planets: very little was left to inhabit once the pirates had finished "punishing" the cities. In the growing resource crunch, reclamation efforts were not considered worthwhile since the ancient planet's resources were already so depleted. Like so many other planets at the time, it was simply left

to its own devices.

And economic fact: as the resources wound down further, more and more planets were cut from contact, until finally, with the exhaustion of the last Fuels, all interstellar contact became extraordinary. It was then that the records about the other planets became less important, and their upkeep too expensive.

Davidson had a chance, if they sent him to one of the long-forgotten planets. No general search would find him. And he wasn't about to give himself away. Davidson rarely told tales.

So everything would have to be new. New life, new story, new man.

The newcomer looked vaguely like a Drortian, but he had been much too tall, and his eyes were blue instead of red. He had come out of nowhere, it seemed, for no one knew of him and he offered no past. But that didn't mean anything at the time; it was true not just of Davidson, but of almost all of us.

I was a farmboy then, trying desperately to become something else. Service to Jamaal had seemed perfect to me. Of course they all knew I was a farmboy despite my silence. It didn't bother them, I learned later—the less travelled the fighter, the fewer legends he or she would have heard, and the more likely he or she would be useful against the Shadows.

Others in the Scarlet Guard were criminals, I'm sure; but whether people were there because of an unsolved murder or because they had been chosen for sacrifice or because they simply sought adventure really didn't matter much. What mattered was that they wouldn't freeze on you when the Shadows began to sing fear into the air. The Shadows were attacking Jamaal because Jamaal still used the old-things and because Jamaal didn't offer sacrifices.

Davidson was as good a fighter as any, ever. He had the fastest sword of all of us and I never saw him freeze. But that's not why he's famous now. He's famous for the day the star dropped down from the sky to search for him, the day he killed a star. And he's famous for the day he disappeared.

But I'll tell his story from the beginning. And don't be surprised if it's my story too.

The older guards said that Davidson had been recruited because of a tavern scrap, in which he punched one of the guard captains senseless before the man could even draw his sword. But I was never sure if that story was true, for like much of what you heard about Davidson, the story seemed embellished with more than a touch of fable.

At any rate, the two of us entered Jamaal's guard the same day. I remember that because he was there, getting his uniforms, when I was being fitted. But it wasn't until we were in the bunkhouse that I had the courage to say anything to him.

"I'm Charya," I said.

He stared at me blankly.

"My name is Charya. What's yours?" He was silent, blank; and it dawned on me that he didn't speak Nadic.

"Sed Charya um," I said in Drortic, my mother's tongue. But he didn't speak that either.

I pointed to myself. "Charya."

"Davidson," he replied, in his low, soft voice.

In the days that followed, I learned just how little Davidson knew about Nada. As the only new recruits in training, we were responsible for each other; and I soon found myself teaching him everything from how to respond to a guard captain's orders to how to eat with a clawspoon. It was odd that he seemed twice my age and yet I was teaching him everything, and it was strangely comforting too, for the frightened boy that I was then.

And Davidson was a quick enough learner. Within a few weeks, he had a fair day-to-day knowledge of Nadic. And within the same time, he had grown from no knowledge of broadswords to being one of the best fighters in camp.

Then one morning a captain gave us our scarlet armor, signalling the end of our apprenticeship. Now we would be able to parade into town to all the respect and fear the other guardsmen drew; now we would be able to treat the sheriff's knights with the same scorn. For we were a fighting force too powerful even for them to challenge—and also, we had seen the Shadows, and were thus touched.

We were getting our armor several weeks early, and I was swelling with pride. Then I learned the reason: patrols were short, and no Shadows had been seen for many nights. That meant an attack was coming, but up which slope of the mountain was anybody's guess.

That Jamaal's castle was on a mountaintop made it visible for miles, especially at night when he made the old thing sun tubes glow to light the darkness. And it also made it remote, although that was partly the villagers' doing, for they had moved off the mountainside when Jamaal refused to join in the sacrifices. But lastly, it made it defendable, which was the reason our guard existed in the first place.

For weeks, our trainers had been tired relieved guardsmen back from their patrols to teach us the woodcraft, stealth, and swordcraft in the early morning light. But that night, we too would patrol one face of Jamaal's mountain.

Davidson and I would be patrolling with Manda La, the only female guard captain. We would patrol the field, the one treeless face of the mountain, for they thought it the least likely place for the attack to come from. But if the attack was as big as they expected, we would all be called to the fight before it was over.

They lowered the bunkhouse shutters, that morning we received the armor, and all the guardsmen were preparing to sleep. I polished my armor and sharpened my sword, even though I knew it didn't have to be sharp to fight the Shadows. Davidson just stared at the wall.

"Davidson?" I asked.

"Davidson?"

His face suddenly snapped around. "What?" His eyes were hard and empty. I felt as if I'd never seen him before.

"Nothing, nothing," I stuttered. "Sorry."

Then the room was totally dark. I felt a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Charya. But I have to let him out. I have to be ready, to kill well."

It was just bright enough to see the grass waving.

"I hate the fields!" Manda hissed.

"Why?"

"Because the waving grass looks so much like the Shadows."

"But you can barely see it!"

Manda stopped walking. "You can barely see the Shadows, too. They're darker than black, I think."

"What?"

"Don't ask me to explain it. All I know is they're pure energy, and they would still seem dark in the deepest cave of Dror."

Davidson was slowly glancing around himself. "Then how will we know they're there?"

She laughed. "You'll know. Hasn't anyone told you of them?"

No, we explained. Our trainers had always wanted to put that subject off.

She sighed. "You'll learn fast enough," she said.

Then I saw more waving grass—except it was waving too high off the ground to be grass. I was suddenly struck with riveting, numbing fear. My blood felt hot; I gasped.

"Shadows," Manda hissed. "More than I've ever seen. Charya, run for help!"

Manda and Davidson stepped forward, in time to reach the first two Shadows, but all I could do was watch. And what swordplay I saw!

The Shadows flowed like water, in and around the swordthrusts of Manda and Davidson. The Shadows' goal was to reach through the visors of the fighting guards—the only opening through which they could touch skin. A touch would burn your life away—that much I'd been taught.

The swordsmen, meanwhile, tried to touch the amorphous beings with their swords. And their touch was equally fatal: the essence of the creature would immediately flow down the furry-lined armor into the dirt, and the Shadow would be melted, gone forever.

The most experienced guards could tell of so melting up to a dozen Shadows, of making the rolling death clouds "sing down their sword" only a handful of times. Yet Davidson melted two even as I watched.

"Charya!" Manda yelled again. "Run for help, now!" But I was still frozen.

Then one of the shimmering black clouds was rolling towards me. It was close, and then closer, and then finally it blocked my view of even the stars. I swung just in time, and it stopped advancing to dance around my sword. It was my chance, and I sprinted up the field. The Shadows were slow in rolling, and I was able to get away.

When I returned with the other guards, Manda was lying dead, and Davidson was in the midst of his now legendary one-man-stand. Five or six Shadows surrounded him; and dozens more waited; yet he dodged, parried, and attacked when able; and Shadow after Shadow sang dead down his sword.

And I could hear the Shadows' other song now, too, the low drone, their song of fear. For it was through fear that you really sensed them, I realized: a sixth sense reserved for knowing only them.

With a yell, I led the guards running to save Davidson.

He was my training partner, my pupil—and as I sensed even then, my protector. He had to be saved.

My sword jumped faster than I knew it could, but the Shadows were faster still. I felt one weave around my head; a swift upward parry drove it back. Then I swung sharply down again, and with a shrill buzz, my first Shadow died into the dirt at my feet.

"Charya!" Davidson's sword whistled by my ear, and a Shadow sang down his armor. I thought of thanking him, but I had to think more of fighting.

Twice more that battle, Shadows sang down my sword. Twice again, Davidson caught a Shadow on my back and saved my life. But finally the battle was over; the Shadows were rolling back down into the forest.

"Davidson!" I leaned against him, puffing. But he was rigid, and he shook me off. I pulled my visor up and smiled, but all I could see through his was a pair of iron eyes that seemed to be seeing nothing and everything at once.

"Davidson, thank you," I said. But he just turned and walked up towards the castle.

Just as we reached the bunkhouse we heard a shriek on the north slope, the kind of shriek you never forget. I'd heard it four times in the battle: the death cry of a man whose skin was touched by a Shadow.

Visors snapped down, and a horde of guardsmen rushed down the slope towards the corpse of one of the few scouts that had been left on the other approaches during the battle. And the Shadows were again in force; again dozens sang their low drone of fear.

Guardsmen were more tired, and though this second battle raged little more than an hour, five more died. Three were female, and their shrieks were even more wrenching. But we held them off, and Jamaal was safe for yet another night.

In this battle I counted: no Shadows melted by me, six by Davidson. When the sun came up we knew they were gone for the day, for Shadows were somehow diminished in the face of the sun's light, and never ventured into open daylight. Only in a cave or in the deepest thicket would you meet a Shadow in the daytime, I later learned.

But we didn't care about such details then. We just slumped in our bunks, some even still in armor.

When I awoke Jamaal himself stood at the next bunk. "Man," he said to Davidson, "you are the greatest swordsman I have ever seen."

Davidson was fully dressed. He always slept but briefly. "Thank you. But how did you see me?"

Jamaal laughed, a low chuckle that befitted the old man. "I have an oldthing which lets me see great distances, even in the dark."

Davidson cocked his head. "You mean a . . ." he grasped for words. "A long tube with special glass windows, that works on light different, lower, than the normal? That works on heat-light?"

Jamaal's eyebrows rose. "Yes! We call it infrared light, and the tube is called a telescope."

"I'd like to see it!"

Jamaal's face brightened. "And so you may. If you'll just do me the honor of describing how you fight so well."

The old man was crafty, I learned later. He knew that no guardsman liked to talk of his fighting, and he also knew that the private thoughts of the best would help the others fight better. But Davidson's answer surprised even him.

"I wish I could. But it's not me who does the fighting. I don't know how it's done."

And no matter how Jamaal pried, he couldn't get Davidson to explain himself any more clearly. Finally he gave up; and, turning to go, he spied me listening.

"Ah, young Charya. I was worried about you. But I believe you will turn out to be one of the best of all." He glanced at Davidson. "You'll do well to keep learning from this man." And with that, Jamaal turned to walk out.

"Please wait," I said.

"Yes?" He raised a feathery eyebrow as he turned back.

"Could you tell me . . ."

"What?"

"Could you tell us about the Shadows?" Davidson asked. "We really haven't been taught."

The old man smiled. "But surely you've at least heard some of the legends? Charya—what do you know of them?"

"Just—what the priests say. That the Shadows were born in a Great War, of tremendous light and thunder. They say that the Shadows were the souls of the evil men, the men who caused the war, trapped forever in the Devil's shadow, the nighttime. The priests say they're trapped until they have punished all those who are unrepentant, who think in the old ways and use the oldthings."

"But you don't believe them?"

"No. If they were doomed forever, then we wouldn't be able to kill them. And I can't see that prayer and sacrifice have anything to do with them at all."

"Excellent!" Jamaal said. "I think you're exactly right."

"Then what are they?" Davidson asked.

Jamaal slowly lowered himself onto an empty bunk. "Even in the better days of the Guard, when I was younger, we weren't sure. They're energy creatures somehow. That seems obvious."

"You mean, like sunlight?" I asked.

"Yes, or like the power in the oldthings. It's called electromagnetism," he said. "But as far as we know, the sunlight can't think and act the way men and Shadows can."

"Then how did these energy clouds learn to think?"

"We were never sure. They *were* born amid the thermonuclear explosions of the Great Wars, and one theory was that they arose from the minds of men caught near the centers of the explosions. Men's brains work somehow with small levels of electric charge, and maybe in the explosions that pattern was somehow reproduced at a much higher energy level. Or maybe they are an entirely separate kind of life that needed the vast amounts of energy to be born."

"And why do they attack you?"

"To get at my generators, I think. The oldthings that produce my energy, Charya. Maybe they need it like we need food. Some Shadows are bigger than others, and it's said that they like to dance on the treetops during lightning

storms. One woman claimed that she saw one struck by lightning, and that it swelled to more than twice its old size.

"But if it's food to them, they don't need it very often, because they've been in existence for years and years with very few oldthings left for them to feed on. And that's why we try to keep them away: because very few oldthings are left, and some day men are going to be ready for them again. I don't want the knowledge of the past to die, so I hire you all to defend it." The old man sighed and painfully rose from the bed. "And you two shall do very well defending the oldthings, I think. A few more like you, and I could rest quite peacefully."

He turned and limped slowly out of the bunkroom, as Davidson helped me strap on my armor. The others were already assembling.

We had lost eleven of our hundred in the battle of the night before; but it seemed that the Shadows had fared far worse, for they were seldom seen in the weeks that followed. They recovered eventually, though; and soon enough some patrol skirmished every night. As time went on, Davidson saved more and more lives and performed more and more feats of brilliant swordwork.

Once, our patrol was besieged on a narrow path in the densest part of the forest. It was so dark that we couldn't see the trees, so dark that we couldn't see anything but the shimmering edges of the Shadows. They danced around us and swooped down from above; they tried to back us into trees, or trip us on the thick vines that covered the forest floor.

But Davidson stood in the midst of us, keeping us together and defending us from above. His long sword jumped with magical quickness from helmet top to helmet top. Three or four Shadows were held at bay above us; then, swiftly, two dove down together at guardsmen on opposite ends of the pack. Davidson's blade was invisible. All you could see was his wrist flick rapidly, and two sharp songs snapped the night air's silence as two Shadows were melted on the same swordthrust. No one's life was lost in that "Battle of the Thicket."

And once he found some Shadows rolling up the very steps of the castle, having somehow slipped through the final ring of watchmen. It was dawn, and the sky was just lightening; Davidson had already removed his helmet. But he still charged forward with furious thrusts and swoops of his sword, and he drove the Shadows back. Ducking and twisting, he managed to defend his skin—and all three Shadows sang down his sword before any of us could even come to his side.

By the time a year had passed, Davidson had gained quite a reputation. When he walked into the village, he wasn't just a Scarlet Guardsman of Jamaal; he was Davidson, the Shadow Slayer. And I was Charya, "the only one that he befriended."

The title was fairly accurate, for he had time for few except me, and we spent most of our free time together. That is, except for the time he spent in the castle, with Jamaal. Somehow, Davidson knew much about oldthings, maybe as much as Jamaal. But I never learned exactly why until later.

We did talk of many other things, though, and after I felt I knew him well enough I asked him about what had bothered me since the first battle.

"Davidson, what happens to you when we fight? You told Jamaal you become someone else. Just who is it that you become?" I paused, breathless, for I knew it was a subject he didn't like to discuss.

He smiled. "I was waiting for you to ask me, Charya, for you're not a natural fighter. I've seen that. You have to think, on the field, and know what you're doing at all times. For you, your awareness of yourself is never stronger, your control never greater, than when you're fighting.

"But I'm the opposite. I'm not a natural fighter, but that fighter is inside me. He's an animal, a caged tiger, with iron eyes and a ruthless quickness, that I lock in the back corner of my mind until I need him. But when a fight comes, I let him free, and he becomes me. You've met him; he knows you. But it's him and not me that fights with you on the mountainsides."

I could only nod, and he was silent for a long time. We never talked again of that subject, but I often thought of what he had said, when I found myself beside the tiger in late night silence.

By the end of that year Davidson was a guard captain; he immediately became the chief of the guard captains. And so it remained for another two years. I myself never was made a guard captain, for it was known by all that Davidson and I should always patrol together. And Davidson's stature seemed to grow every month.

We always made the longest, deepest forays, and we melted Shadows every night. Because of the distances we travelled, many of his greatest fights went unseen by anyone but myself, like the stand he made on the edge of a cliff, and the time his arms alone kept a trio of the clouds at bay, after a swing of his sword had embedded it in a tree limb. But perhaps the Shadows themselves came to recognize us, for sometimes they ran when they found us, and we had to chase them.

So perhaps he was never truly appreciated, except by myself and the Shadows; yet he was still a subject of fantastic rumors, the stories of young guardsmen who had seen or pretended to have seen his great sword flashing through one or another of his battles. And then came the events from which sprung his greatest fame.

One night at dawn a falling star catapulted down from the sky. It seemed to slow above our heads; then circled abruptly and landed softly in the hills beyond the village. The tiger ran from Davidson's eyes, and he swore in a language I had never heard before. And the other guards were also shaken, but in a way different from Davidson. They were not religious men and women—for no one could be and still challenge the Shadows the way we did—but when Davidson seemed angry, they seemed awed and fearful.

"What does a star want with us?" a guardsman softly asked.

"It wants me," Davidson said. He began to walk down the hill towards town, and I followed wordlessly. The star awed me, yes, but I was even more awed by the man in

front. And to see a star up close, I probably would have gone anyway. All the others stayed behind.

At the edge of the village Davidson stopped. "There'll be men from that star craft in the village, I think." He paused. "They should look much like me. Charya—please go there, and see. Try to find out how many. I'd go with you, but they might kill me on sight."

His last words startled me, and I looked at him. I saw no iron in his eyes, but instead only fear, for the first time since I'd known him. I went.

I paused at the corner of the tavern, for I could hear strange voices inside.

"And where do I climb to arrive at this castle?" one of the voices asked. They all spoke very formal, wooden Nadic.

"The mountain. On the north end of the village. If you can't find Davidson just ask for Charya. He'll know where Davidson is." That was a local voice; a very frightened local voice. I glanced around the corner, counted, and then sprinted out of the village.

"There were three," I said to Davidson. I felt comforted, for he was the tiger again: He said nothing, but nodded, and led me up into the hills toward the star. We soon found it: it was a mechanical metal craft.

"Remember!" he said suddenly, "we'll have to do more than just touch them." Then we ran silently to the craft's edge, the kind of sure-footed, breath-held silence that only a guardsman can approach.

The port was open and we jumped in. Killing men was easy, compared with Shadows. There were two there; one each.

Davidson walked to a wall of small windows and levers, and made several complicated twists and pushes. Then he turned to me. "Let's get out of here."

He jumped out of the craft, and I followed as he ran and dove behind a small hammock. A searing roar broke the morning stillness and the ground shuddered at the noise of a thousand thunderclaps. Dirt and rubble flew all around us, and when I got up, the craft was gone.

"Now we wait for them," he said. "They'll be armed and cautious. Much harder to kill." I nodded, and we each hid in the hillocks.

I saw them first, and they paraded right by me without seeing. Then, about twenty yards away, they split, and two disappeared in different directions leaving the third slowly gazing around himself. He looked in my direction just in time to see my sword, and it bit through his throat before he could do anything else.

As the man died, he reached to his belt, and pulled off a small box. He pointed it at me, and suddenly bright light jumped out from a needle on its end. Luckily, it missed me, and disappeared into the sky, for the dying man's aim was bad. The arm fell dead before he could fire again.

I took the weapon from the dead star-man's hand, and pursued one of his comrades. En route, I discovered how to push it to make the light, and that weapon, coupled with my stealth, left the man with no chance. And even as he fell, I heard the third man's death scream also.

When Davidson found me, his eyes were no longer iron. He smiled when he saw what I had done, and asked for the light box. When I gave it to him he destroyed it, burning it

to a cinder with another lightbox that he now carried on his belt.

I looked at him, and he sighed. "These are the weapons of another place, and another time. They don't belong here, Charya."

"Where do they belong?"

"Where I come from."

"The stars?"

He nodded. And he kept the box on his belt.

"They want to kill me," he said, "because I committed a great crime. It was a political crime, and a spiritual one. I was an assassin." He glanced at me, but I hadn't flinched. "You're not surprised?"

I shook my head no. "I guessed from the first that you had come from far away. And when a man comes that far to hide, he must be hiding from something very great indeed."

"Well, there was a famous man where I come from. A man some said was a savior, a messiah, who had finally arrived to deliver the people from evil. But the man used drugs, and clever trickery, and machines to convince his followers, and so others decided that he had to be stopped. They hired me. A professional. I killed the Great One, and I became one of the most celebrated men of my world; of all history." Davidson frowned. "Celebrated, or infamous."

My brow wrinkled. "World? I thought you were from one of the stars."

He nodded. "Yes, that's the best way to understand it. I'm from a star. A star much bigger than that starcraft, mind you, bigger even than this world."

"Bigger than the whole world?" My mind reeled. This world wasn't infinite—it had edges. He nodded slowly.

"Don't ask me to explain it. But the star men want me, for killing the Great One didn't stop his followers. They had started a war, and now it seems that the wrong side won. For otherwise, they wouldn't have come after me—they had promised not to. But they came. And they'll be back." Tears began to form, just very small ones at the corners of his eyes.

"We could run."

He nodded slowly. "We could." Then he sighed. "That had been my plan, when I exploded their spacecraft. But they'll catch me."

"We can fight."

"Yes. We can fight. But they'll be very strong."

He was silent for the rest of the climb.

Every morning and night after that day, Davidson went into the castle, to scan the sky with Jamaal's telescopes. And he began to carry the light weapon with him everywhere.

Then one evening I awoke and he was gone. Many stars had fallen from the sky that afternoon, the others told me. They had fallen all around the village, and were still there now. I quickly strapped on my armor, and ran down towards what all the other guards were too afraid of. Went there, even though Davidson had left me a note:

"I know you are willing, but it isn't your fight. You are

my brother, but it is my crime and my punishment. I must fight alone."

And I got there too late. Even as I approached, the stars returned to the sky, one by one. And when I arrived in town, they asked *me* what had happened. I spent days searching for information, for any witnesses, but none had seen anything, and none had heard anything, for all had cowered inside at the sight of the dropping stars.

Then, weeks later, the rumors started. The falling stars had been awful, fire-breathing dragons, which Davidson drove off at the cost of his life. Or that Davidson and Charya had driven them off, as I became bound in his legend. Other rumors had us fighting golden star-men, or even golden daytime Shadows. And some said that Davidson was not dead, that he still roamed the hills. They said that he was mad, or that he was wounded, or that he was somehow transformed; but more and more men began to claim seeing him. And swiftly the rumors became legends; they made Davidson the most famous swordsman in the kingdom.

I never found his body.

Jamaal made me chief guard captain the day I returned from my search for Davidson. It was only the second time I'd seen him. He didn't ask me for news about Davidson, for he seemed to know that the man was gone anyway. And from then on, I had to live my life alone.

Alone I had to sit in the tavern, listening to the priests who always searched us out, whispering "But you must repent! The oldthings are evil. The oldthings caused the Great Wars. You must consent to join in the sacrifices, to cast your name among the lots. To appease them—or you'll end up one yourself!"

Alone I went to visit Jamaal, who now lay bedridden on some days. Alone I taught the other guards about what an oldthing was, and why they had to be protected.

And alone I fell when I went out on patrol; for being with any of the other guardsmen was not the same as being together with Davidson. And when the Shadows ran, I could no longer simply chase them, for the others needed protecting.

At first, it struck me as strange that the Shadows ran from me alone. And then it dawned on me that a transformation had taken place, that it had taken place and I hadn't even noticed. For now, I too gave way to a natural fighter inside me; I too uncaged a tiger with iron eyes.

Maybe Davidson was wrong. Maybe the tiger lives in all of us, maybe we can all be natural fighters. Or maybe it's Davidson's tiger who now patrols the mountain through me.

The work of the Guard is important; but it went on before me and it will go on after me. I had never left the Scarlet Guard before his disappearance, because Davidson had been my life. I can't leave it now, because I'm all that's left of him. Unless—who knows? Maybe some of the legends are right. I'm not very hopeful, but I never saw his body. In the midnight darkness, I search not just for Shadows; I search for Davidson. And maybe if I find him he'll take me to see one of the edges of the world.

TION IN HOLLYWOOD. UNDER THE RAINBOW. BY CRAIG MILLER SCIENCE FICTION IN H

□ Science fiction is sweeping through Hollywood like a plague of locusts. Every producer, director, studio production head, and agent is looking for a book or an original screenplay they can turn into "another *Star Wars*."

Last issue, I went into detail on how and why science fiction movies and TV shows are making so much money these days, not just on ticket sales but on related merchandise as well. The goal in Hollywood is Big Money, and science fiction is seen as the current ticket.

Not everyone involved with making a science fiction or fantasy film is only interested in money. Some are interested in telling a good story, presenting a quality product, and entertaining the public. Unfortunately, most just see those as necessary stops on the road to the money, and some don't bother to stop.

Article after article has been written about the motion picture and, especially, the television industry jumping on the band wagon following every successful film and show. The plethora of Lawyers, Cowboys, Doctors, Detectives, and Cute Families in a continuing, cyclical succession has been with us since the beginning of television.

The same holds true for motion pictures. We've had spates of Motorcycles, Westerns, and Detectives. *Jaws* was followed by countless films about giant something-or-others on a ram-

page. Many of those films even had names that rhymed with *Jaws*.

And so the cycle continues with science fiction. As was noted in the second section of last month's column, and as can be seen by reading the second section of this month's column, there are a lot of science fiction and fantasy movies and television shows in production or awaiting release/airing. And most of them are not very good.

The problem stems from "the-people-in-charge" not being able to tell which elements of a film were the ones audiences enjoyed. This is often obvious with sequels to successful films. The makers of *Jaws 2* and *Exorcist II*:



Photo courtesy: CBS-TV

Aslan, the Narnian lion, as he appears in the CBS production of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

The Heretic obviously didn't know what people got out of the original films. Francis Ford Coppola obviously did know what people liked about *The Godfather*, because it's reflected in *The Godfather, Part II*.

The *Star Wars* sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*, shouldn't suffer from sequel-itis, because it isn't an instance of discovering that you have a successful film on your hands, and a desire to make some extra money by bringing out a sequel. *The Empire Strikes Back* was conceived at the same time as *Star Wars* and the same basic elements exist in both. This is not to say that the sequel will simply be a re-hashing of the original, but it will be a continuation utilizing the elements that made the first film great, and expanding upon them.

ACCURACY

Fans of science fiction films frequently bring up the question, "Why doesn't the producer/director/script-writer check out his science better?" This is not a simple question. It has several different, equally applicable answers, which I'll now attempt to explain as completely, and as simply, as I can.

In some cases, whether or not a film is completely accurate scientifically is of little importance. Films that fall into the fantasy or science fantasy classification do not really need to be accu-

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rate. A horror film, or a film set on another planet but not directly dealing with science can be more lenient about how much scientific research is necessary to make the film work.

This is not an indulgence to throw the laws of physics to the wind, mind you. The reason science fiction and fantasy works is that the reader or viewer is willing to "suspend his feelings of disbelief," to accept the incredible as credible. If a filmmaker tries to stretch that suspension too far, by including too many elements of the incredible, he is going to lose his audience.

Films such as *The Thing*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and even *Star Wars* come under the fantasy or science fantasy classification. Films such as *The Andromeda Strain*, *The Terminal Man*, and *Meteor*, which have elements of science as their main theme, need to be very accurate. *Fantastic Voyage*, the film involving the shrinking of a team of scientists for a trip through the blood vessels and digestive tract of a human being, required the suspension of disbelief for the viewer to accept the shrinking of the scientists and their equipment. After that, the film tried to establish and maintain scientific accuracy regarding what the scientists encountered during their voyage. If these

films were not at least reasonably accurate, they would be laughed off of the screen.

With some films, the reason scientific accuracy is discarded is that reality isn't as interesting or exciting visually as what the creative minds making the film can dream up.

A battle in the void of outer space would be just plain dull. Two ships (or more, perhaps, if it were a large battle), separated by extreme distances, would be floating out in space until the computer of one locked onto the coordinates of the other. A beam of some sort, which might or might not be vis-

ment. For the distances to be accurate, either the two ships couldn't appear on the screen at the same time (due to the great separation) or they would be so small as to be hard to see. No dodging, no rolling, no rapid-fire blasts from a laser-cannon. Nothing. First there would be two ships, and then only one. Dullsville.

One complaint about *Star Wars* in this regard was that the various ships had to turn and face the direction they were travelling in order to fly. Additionally, they banked and rolled to turn and dodge. This is necessary in an atmosphere, but not in the vacuum of space. However, if you had the ships travelling sideways, backwards, or upside-down, the average member of the audience would be incredulous, if not overcome with laughter.

The average filmgoer is not all that familiar with the laws and properties of science, especially the high-level ones involved in space flight. The World War II dog-fight-type space battles in *Star Wars*, as well as similar scenes in other films, were designed to be exciting and entertaining, and as that, they succeeded. A realistic space battle just wouldn't have worked.

The increase of excitement is also the reason for such things, generally, as sound in space. Everyone knows by



Christopher Lee and Britt Ekland appear in *The Wicker Man*.

ible to the naked eye, would suddenly bridge the distances involved, and the other ship would be destroyed in one fell swoop.

This is not a scene to build excite-

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now that there is no sound in a vacuum, yet film after film has meteors and rockets going swoosh as they pass by. Why do they persist in this obvious error? Because without the sound, the scene isn't as interesting or exciting. Look at a movie on television some time, and turn the sound off during such scenes (or, for that matter, during scenes at a seashore). The scene is a lot less interesting without the sound.



This set for *Brave New World* was designed by Tom John, set designer for Broadway's *The Wiz*.

A parallel can be drawn with music tracks used as background in both movies and television. The music is there to heighten the mood of each scene. In some cases, the music is an integral part of creating the effect desired by the filmmaker. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* has just such a scene. When the Anthony Perkins character stabs the Janet Leigh character, it is the music which screams, not Ms. Leigh. The knife is never shown touching her body; the deft combination of quick-cutting from a shot of the knife to a shot of her body and back again, with the repeated, piercing screech of the music creates an illusion of having just witnessed a stabbing. The next time *Psycho* is on television, try watching that scene with the sound turned off. You'll find a dramatic difference.

There is no question that music is an important part of almost every film, yet no one asks, "Where is the music coming from?" It's understood that the

characters in a film don't hear the background music. It's there for us, the audience. No one objects that there isn't an orchestra following our heroes about; yet a single sound in space, and people are up in arms. (Perhaps if the rockets made noises like a waltz or a fox trot, no one would complain. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the spaceships did make waltz noises and no one complained.)

Usually, you can tell by watching a film if the inaccuracies are purposeful or not. A film with only one or two such errors was probably planned that way. A film with error after error is probably suffering from ignorance.

There is probably no hope of relief from the ignorant errors. Occasionally, a film company will hire a technical advisor in order to prevent such errors. NASA frequently provides a technical advisor to film companies, as they are doing for the upcoming James Bond epic, *Moonraker*. *Star Trek—The Motion Picture* had Isaac Asimov read over their script to check for errors, in an attempt to prevent them.



Julie Cobb oversees the baby assembly line in NBC's upcoming mini-series, *Brave New World*.

I'm not sure, but it seems evident that "*Battlestar Galactica*" doesn't have an advisor.



The crew of commercial space-tug Nostromo begins to explore an uncharted planet in 20th Century Fox's *Alien*.

A group of film fans in Los Angeles have formed a company that offers technical advice to filmmakers, in the hopes of preventing scientific errors, such as in *Dr. Cyclops*, where radioactivity is conducted through steam pipes the way electricity is conducted through wires. I have my doubts that this company will get anywhere, since film companies tend either to go to highly respected sources, such as NASA, or to ignore the problem entirely. Many people in Hollywood feel that it doesn't matter whether or not a science fiction film is accurate. "After all," they think, "it's just science fiction."

David Gerrold, science fiction writer and TV scriptwriter, tells of one television producer who somehow got involved with a science fiction show. This producer felt that the show didn't have to adhere to the laws of physics. "After all," he said, "*Star Wars* didn't, and made a lot of money." That's not strictly true. Admittedly, *Star Wars* did bend the laws of physics here and there, but most often, what Lucas did was extrapolate on current scientific knowledge. This is a common practice, done in most good science fiction.

This producer, on the other hand, wasn't planning on any extrapolations based on current state-of-the-art. One of his ideas was for the show's main character to wear a wrist-viewer that would allow him to see what was going on anywhere else in the Uni-

HOLLYWOOD UNDER THE RAINBOW BY CRAIG MILLER SCIENCE FICTION IN HOL

verse. With bending like that, we go from "laws" to "pretzels" of physics.

It's little wonder that this same producer couldn't imagine why grown men were involved with something as juvenile as science fiction. What he most wanted to know was when he could get back to doing something "real," like Westerns.

Many people have the attitude that science fiction is somehow not quite real. At least, not as a literary art form. It's my belief that this is part of the reason *Star Wars* didn't win the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1977. Many members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences just couldn't bring themselves to vote for science fiction as the best that their industry had to offer. I think it's a shame, but I think it's an attitude that's changing.

At one time, science fiction films were all "A" pictures. That is, they were major films with big budgets. *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *Things to Come* were considered part of a studio's quality package. Then, for various reasons, science fiction and horror films became "B" pictures, made quickly with low budgets.

Once again, science fiction films are becoming "A" pictures. *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* were both "A" films. *Alien*, the *Martian Chronicles* (for television), and

Star Trek—The Motion Picture are all "A" films. With the time and money invested in these films, more care is being taken to be certain that a 10- to 20-million dollar film isn't laughed off of the screen because of scientific inaccuracies.

Many film companies are trying to point out just how accurate their films are, to avoid being compared to some of the more ludicrously inaccurate films. To do this, they are calling their films "science fact" rather than "science fiction." *Moonraker*, *Weather War*, and *Meteor* are all claiming to be science fact. The term "science fact" is somewhat misleading, since it would seem to better fit nature films like *Birds Do It*, *Bees Do It* and educational films like *Our Friend Mr. Sun* and *Hemo the Magnificent*. In any case, it bodes well for the state of accuracy in science fiction films. We won't have to watch too many more scenes, like the one from *Catwoman of the Moon*, in which Our Hero demonstrates how hot the sun-side surface of the moon is by taking a cigaret from the outside pocket of his space suit, placing it on the ground, and watching it burst into flames.

WORKS IN PROGRESS AND OTHER NEWS

In 1973, *The Wicker Man* was made in Scotland by a British film company.

It played in England to excellent reviews, was sold to Warner Brothers for distribution in the United States and Canada, and for all intents and purposes, hasn't been seen since. After a long and harrowing series of events, the film is finally going to be released in the United States and Canada.

The film was written by Anthony Shaffer, the author of *Sleuth* (both the play and the film) and the scriptwriter for Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy*. *The Wicker Man* is an excellent mystery-suspense film in the mold of *Sleuth*, with Hitchcockian overtones. *Cinefantastique*, a science fiction film journal, called the it "the *Citizen Kane* of Horror films." While not really a horror film, the "surprise ending" is fairly intense. I thoroughly enjoyed the film, and its star, Christopher Lee, gives one of the finest performances of his career. Highly recommended.

Star Trek—The Motion Picture is still in production. The highly tentative release date of Christmas 1979 may or may not stick with the film. As of early December, few, if any of the special effects shots have been made, with the budget climbing higher every day. If they can get it done, it looks to be a good, exciting extension of the television series. Cross your fingers that they won't have to cut corners to get things done.

Bill Melendez is still working on an

'WOOD UNDER THE RAINBOW' BY CRAIG MILLER · SCIENCE FI

animated version of C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. Director Melendez is working closely with Dave Connell, producer of Children's Television Workshop. CBS will air the film on the nights of April 1st and 2nd. If the specials do well in the ratings, plans are for Melendez to produce animated versions of the other books in Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*.

Principal photography started in December for Steven Spielberg's World War II fantasy, *1941*. Based on a real incident, Spielberg has signed Toshiro Mifune, Christopher Lee, Warren Oates, Robert Stack, John Belushi, Tim Matheson, and Dan Ackroyd to appear in the film. Director John Landis also has a part in the film.

Scheduled for release around the 25th of May is *Alien*, the latest big-budget science fiction film from Twentieth Century-Fox. It's the story of the seven-person crew of a commercial space-going tugboat who encounter what seems to be a distress call from a planet near their path. The film wrapped production in October, and, according to those who have seen it, it is excellent. To a tightly paced science fiction/suspense story, add the talents of four top designers (H.R. Giger, Ron Cobb, Chris Foss, and Moebius), two top art directors (Les Dilley and Roger Christian, both Oscar winners for *Star Wars*), and a top special effects director (Brian Johnson), and you should come up with an exciting, breathtaking motion picture.

Just as was the case with *Star Wars*, if the film is anywhere near as good as its production designs and script would indicate, Twentieth Century-Fox has another winner on its hands.

Walt Disney Productions is preparing their entry into the world of big-budget science fiction films, *The Black Hole*, for a Christmas 1979 release. At an announced budget of \$17.5 million, this is the most expensive film in the history of Disney Studios. The original script was plagued with scientific inaccuracies, but production was halted for a time and a new script prepared. Ac-

cording to reports, this new script has been gone over with a keen eye to remove any such inaccuracies.

The production is making use of a new camera system known as ACES (Automated Camera Effects System) which, according to Disney publicity, "will allow more flexibility in movement in front of the camera than ever before, with maximum optical precision." The film began shooting in early October, and will continue production through mid-April.

Ray Bradbury's classic, *The Martian Chronicles*, is finally being filmed after a countless number of aborted attempts. This production will be a three-part, six-hour mini-series on NBC, tentatively scheduled to air this fall. It is being shot in England and on Malta as a joint effort by a conglomeration of companies including NBC and the BBC.

The Martian Chronicles is being directed by Michael Anderson, who also directed *Logan's Run*, *Orca*, and *Around the World in 80 Days*. The script was written by Richard Matheson, whose credits include *I Am Legend* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. John Stears, special production and mechanical effects supervisor for *Star Wars*, is in charge of special effects. Rock Hudson, Roddy McDowell, Fritz Weaver, Maria Schell, and Darren McGavin star. Although unwilling to name him or her, the publicist for the film told me that "a prominent rock artist will be composing and designing the music."

Meteore, the big-budget science fiction disaster film from American International, Warner Brothers, and Run Run Shaw, is scheduled for release on 15 June 1979. The budget for the film, originally \$16 million, has been increased to \$17.2 million, the extra \$1.2 million all going into special effects. The total special-effects budget for the film is now \$9.2 million, just \$0.3 million less than the entire cost of *Star Wars*.

Irwin Allen, who recently switched

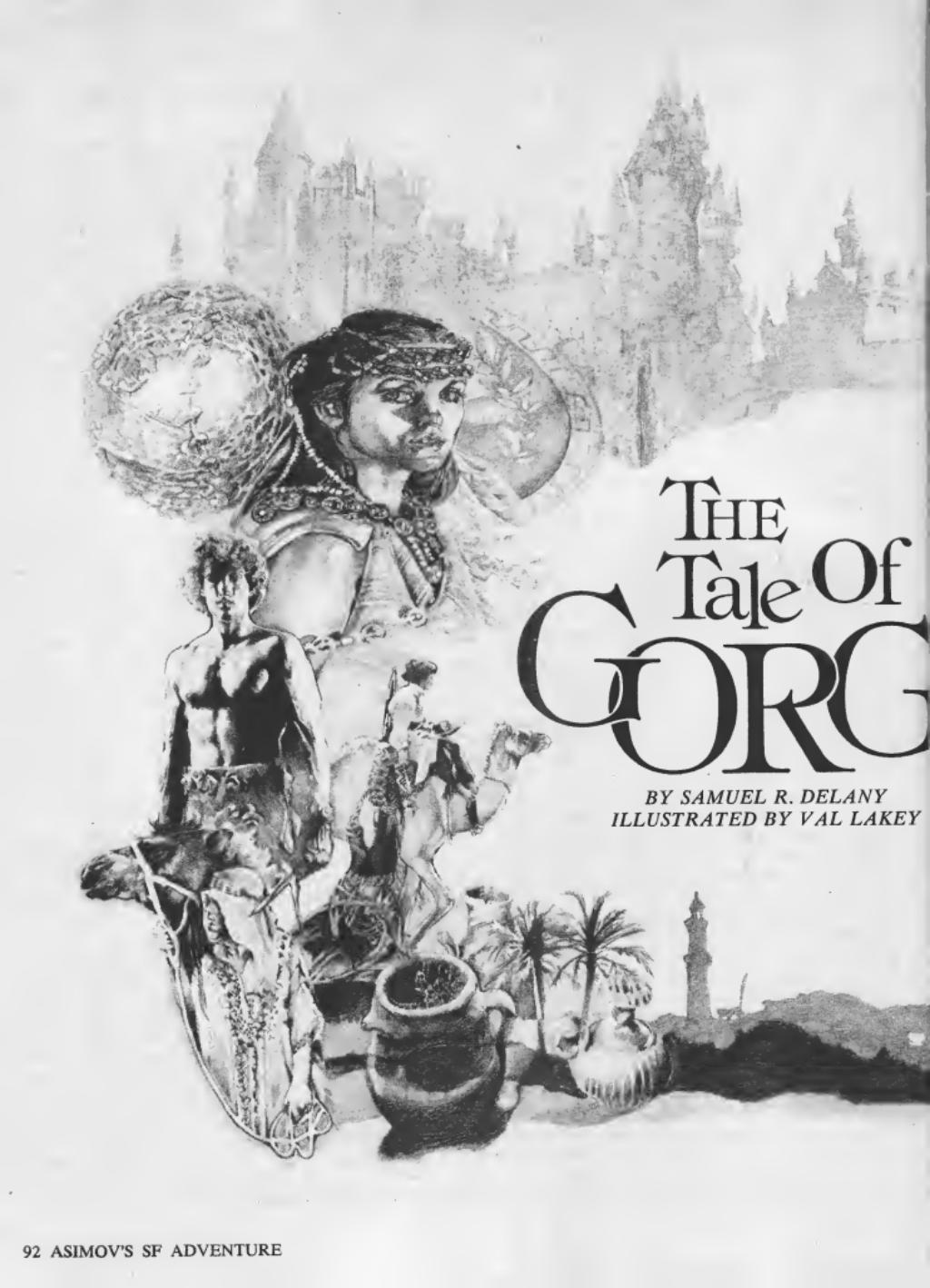
from schlock television science fiction to schlock motion picture science fiction, has signed Paul Newman and William Holden to star in his current production, *The Day the World Ended*. The film began shooting in early February on the Kona Coast of Hawaii. The script was written by Carl Foreman and Stirling Silliphant, and is being directed by James Goldstone.

Along with *The Martian Chronicles*, NBC also has scheduled a mini-series of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Designed to be shown in two two-hour segments, the production has not yet been given a definite air date. The production stars Julie Cobb, Bud Cort, Keir Dullea, Kristofer Tabori, and Marcia Strassman.

According to producer Jacqueline Babbitt, the film has another star, "the property itself. The book is a classic, and we're sticking very close to it."

Steven Spielberg is working on some additions and deletions from his science fiction classic, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Some of the scenes from the middle-third of the film, wherein Richard Dreyfuss's character goes crazy, will be deleted, including his building the mountain out of mashed potatoes. New scenes showing the aliens and the inside of the Mothership are being added.

Currently in production is a motion picture version of *Conan* from the stories by Robert E Howard (not to mention the highly popular Marvel Comic). The script was written by Oliver Stone, who will co-direct with Joe Alves. Master makeup artist Rick Baker will be in charge of the makeup for what looks to be the biggest makeup film in history. Some scenes call for hundreds of monsters to be on the screen at one time. Some of the early production design work was done by Ron Cobb and Jim Danforth. Ed Pressman is producing, with Ed Summer and Bob Greenberg working as associate producers. Arnold Schwarzenegger stars as the mighty barbarian, Conan.



THE Tale Of **GORG**

BY SAMUEL R. DELANY
ILLUSTRATED BY VAL LAKEY

HK



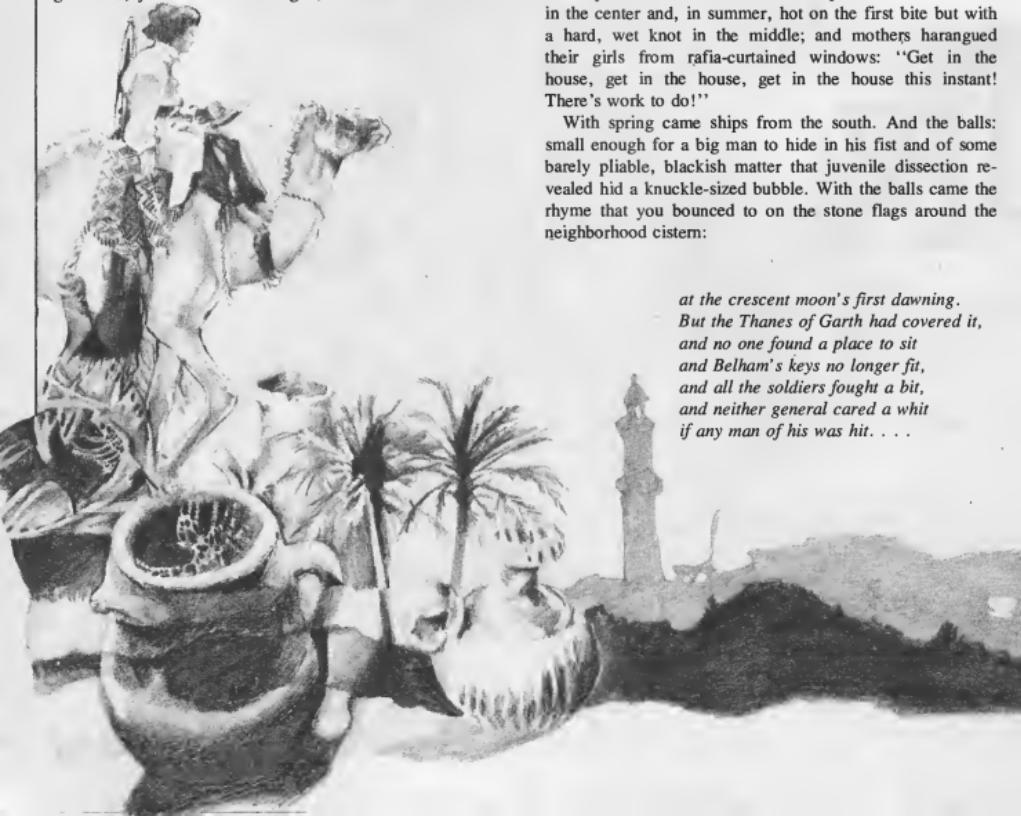
His mother from time to time claimed eastern connections with one of the great families of fisherwomen in the Ul-vayn Islands; she had the eyes, but not the hair. His father was a sailor, who, after a hip injury at sea, had fixed himself to the port of Kolhari, where he worked as a waterfront dispatcher for a wealthy importer. So Gorgik grew up in the greatest of Neveryon ports, his youth along the docks substantially rougher than his parents would have liked, and peppered with more trouble than they thought they could bear—though not so rough or troubled as some of his friends'. He was neither killed by accidental deviltry nor arrested.

Childhood in Kolhari? Somehow, soldiers and sailors from the breadth of Neveryon ambled and shouted all through it, up and down the Old Pavé; merchants and merchants' wives strolled on Black Avenue, so called for its topping that, on hot days, softened under the sandals; travelers and tradesmen met to chat in front of dockside inns—the Sump, the Kraken, the Dive; and among them all slipped the male and female slaves, those of aristocratic masters dressed more elegantly than many merchants while others were so ragged and dirty their sex was indistinguishable, yet all with the hinged, iron collars above fine

or frayed shirt-necks or boney shoulders, loose or tight around stringy or fleshy necks. Frequently this double memory returned to Gorgik: Leaving a room where a lot of coins, some in neat stacks, some scattered, lay on sheets of written-over parchment, to enter the storage room at the back of the warehouse his father worked in—but instead of bolts of hide and bales of hemp, he saw some two dozen men, cross-legged on the gritty flooring, a few leaning against the earthen wall, three asleep in the corner and one making water a-straddle the trough that grooved the room's center. All were sullen, silent, and naked—save the iron around their necks. As he walked through, none even looked at him. An hour, or two hours, or four hours later, he walked into that storage room again; it was empty. About the floor lay two dozen collars, hinged open. From each, a chain coiled across the pitted grit to hang from a plank set in the wall to which the last, oversized links were pegged. The space was cool and fetid. In another room, coins were clinking together. Had he been six? Or seven? Or five . . . ? On the streets behind the dockside warehouses women made jewelry and men made baskets; for coppers boys sold baked potatoes that in winter were crunchy and cold on the outside with just a trace of warmth in the center and, in summer, hot on the first bite but with a hard, wet knot in the middle; and mothers harangued their girls from raffia-curtained windows: "Get in the house, get in the house, get in the house this instant! There's work to do!"

With spring came ships from the south. And the balls: small enough for a big man to hide in his fist and of some barely pliable, blackish matter that juvenile dissection revealed hid a knuckle-sized bubble. With the balls came the rhyme that you bounced to on the stone flags around the neighborhood cistern:

*at the crescent moon's first dawning.
But the Thanes of Garth had covered it,
and no one found a place to sit
and Belham's keys no longer fit,
and all the soldiers fought a bit,
if any man of his was hit. . . .*



The rhyme went on as long as you could keep the little ball going, usually with a few repetitions, as many improvisations; and when you wanted to stop, you concluded:

... and the eagle sighed and the lion cried for all
my lady's warning!

On *warning!* you slammed the ball hard as you could into the cistern's salt stained wall. The black ball soared in the sunlight. The boys and girls ran, pranced, squinted. . . . Whoever caught it got next bounce.

Sometimes it was "... for all the Mad Witch's warning . . ." which didn't fit the rhythm; sometimes it was "... for all Mad Olin's warning . . ." which did, but no one was sure what that meant. And anyone with an amphibrachic name was always up for ribbing. For one thing was certain: Who'd ever done the warning had meant no good by it.

A number of balls went into cisterns. A number of others simply went wherever lost toys go. By autumn the balls were gone. (He was sad for that, too, because by many days practice on the abandoned cistern down at the alley-end behind the warehouse, he had gotten so he could bounce the ball higher than any but the children half again his age.) The rhyme lingered in the heaped over corners of memory's store, turned up, at longer and longer intervals, perhaps a moment before sleep on a winter evening, in a run along the walled bank of the Big Khora on some next summer's afternoon.

A run in the streets of Kolhari? Those streets were loud with the profanity of a dozen languages. At the edges of the Spur, Gorgik learned that *voldreg* meant "excrement-caked privates of a female camel," which seemed to be the most common epithet in the glottal-rich speech of the dark-robed northern men, but if you used the word *ini*, which meant "a white gilly-flower," with these same men, you could get a smack for it. In the Alley of Gulls, inhabited mostly by southern folk, he heard the women, as they luggered their daubed baskets of water, dripping over the triangular flags, talk of *nivu* this and *nivu* that, in their sibilant, lisping way, usually with a laugh. But when he asked Miese, the southern barbarian girl who carried vegetables and fish to the back door of the Kraken, what it meant, she told him, laughing, that it was not a word a man would want to know.

"Then it must have something to do with what happens to women every month, yes?" he'd asked with all the city-bred candor and sophistication of his (by now) fourteen years.

Miese tugged her basket higher on her hip: "I should think a man would want to know about *that!*" She stepped up the stairs to shoulder through the leather curtain that, when the boards were removed for the day, became the Kraken's back door. "No, it has nothing to do with a woman's monthly blood. You city people have the strangest ideas." And she was gone inside.

He never did learn the meaning.

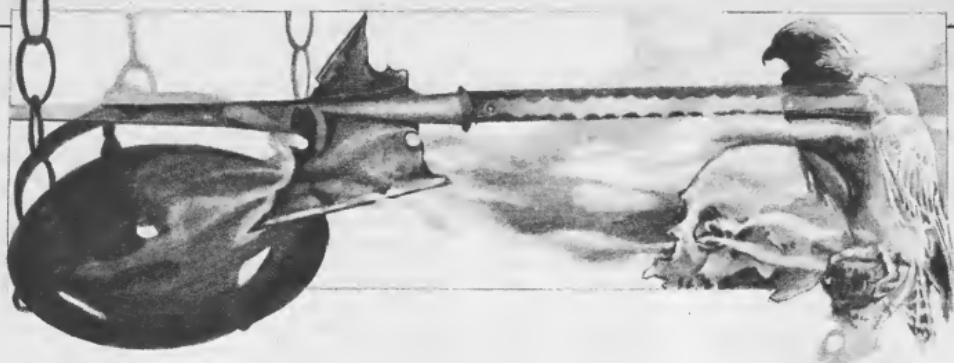
The lower end of New Pavé (so called now for a hundred years) was one with the dockside. Along the upper end, male and female prostitutes loitered, or drank in the streets, or solicited, many from exotic places and many spawned by old Kolhari herself, all with different dresses and personalities, all with stories astonishingly alike. Kolhari port was home to any and every adventurer. Adolescence spent roaming its boisterous backstreets, its bustling avenues, with its constant parade of strangers, taught Gorgik the double lesson that is, finally, all civilization can know:

The breadth of the world is vasty and wide;
nevertheless movement from place to place in it is
possible; the ways of humanity are various and com-
plex, but nevertheless negotiable.

Five weeks after Gorgik turned sixteen, the Child Empress Ynelgo, whose coming was just and generous, seized power. On that blustery afternoon in the month of the Rat, soldiers shouted from every street corner that the city's name was, now, in fact Kolhari, as every beggar woman and ship's boy and tavern maid and grain vendor on the waterfront had called it time out of memory. (It was no longer Neveryóna—which is what the last, dragon-bred residents of the High Court of Eagles had officially but ineffectually re-named it some twenty years back.) That night several wealthy importers were assassinated, their homes sacked, their employees murdered—among them Gorgik's father. The employees' families were taken as slaves.

While in another room his mother's sobbing turned suddenly into a scream, then abruptly ceased, Gorgik was dragged naked into the freezing street. He spent his next five years in a Neverýon obsidian mine, a hundred miles inland at the foot of the Faltha Mountains.

Gorgik was tall, strong, big-boned, good-natured, and clever. Cleverness and good nature had kept him from death and arrest on the docks. In the mines, along with the fact that he had been taught enough rudiments of writing to put down names and record workloads, they eventually secured the slave a work-gang foremanship: which meant that, with only a little stealing, he could get enough food so that instead of the wiry muscles that tightened along the bony frames of most miners, his arms and thighs and neck and chest swelled, hard-veined and heavy, on his already heavy bones. At twenty-one he was a towering,



black-haired gorilla of a youth, eyes permanently reddened from rock-dust, a scar from a pick-ax flung in a barracks brawl spilling over one brown cheekbone; his hands were huge and rough-palmed, his foot soles like cracked leather—he did not look a day more than fifteen years above his actual age.



The caravan of the Handmaid and Vizerine Myrgot, of the tan skin and tawny eyes, returning from the mountain Hold of fabled Ellamon to the High Court of Eagles at Kolhari, made camp half a mile from the mines, beneath the Falthus' ragged and piney escarpments. In her youth, Myrgot had been called "an interesting looking girl"; today she was known as a bottomless well of cunning and vice.

It was spring and the Vizerine was bored.

She had volunteered for the Ellamon mission because life at the High Court, under the Child Empress Ynelgo, whose reign was peaceful and productive, had of late also been damnable dull. The journey itself had refreshed her. But within Ellamon's fabled walls, when one had spent the obligatory afternoon in the mountain sun, squinting up to watch the swoopings and turnings of the great, winged creatures (about which had gathered all the fables), she found herself, in the midst of her politicking with the mountain Lairds and burghers, having to suffer the attentions of provincial bores—who were worse, she decided after a week, than their cosmopolitan counterparts.

But the mission was done. She sighed,

Myrgot stood in her tent door; she looked up at the black Falthus clawing through evening clouds, and wondered if she might see any of the dark and fabled creatures arc the sunset. But no, for when all the fables were over, the beasts were pretty well restricted to a few hundred yards of soaring and at a loss for launching anywhere other than their craggy perches. She watched the women in red scarves go off among other tents. She called, "Jahor . . . ?"

The eunuch steward with the large nose stepped from behind her, turbaned and breeched in blue wool.

"I have dismissed my maids for the night, Jahor. The mines are not far from here. . . ." The Vizerine, known for her high-handed manners and low-minded pleasures, put her forearm across her breasts and kneaded her bare, bony elbow. "Go to the mines, Jahor. Bring me back the foulest, filthiest, wretchedest pit-slave from the deepest and darkest hole. I wish to slake my passion in some vile, low way." Her tongue, only a pink bud, moved along the tight line of her lips.

Jahor touched the back of his fist to his forehead, nodded, bowed, backed away the three required steps, turned, and departed.

An hour later, the Vizerine was looking out through the seam in the canvas at the tent's corner.

The boy whom Jahor guided before him into the clearing limped a few steps forward, then turned his face up in the light drizzle which had begun minutes ago, opening and closing his mouth as if around a recently-forgotten word. The pit-slave's name was Noyeed. He was fourteen. He had lost an eye three weeks back, and the wound had never been dressed and had not healed. He had a fever. He was shivering. Bleeding gums had left his mouth scabby. Dirt had made his flesh scaly. He had been at the mines one month and was not expected to last another. Seeing this as a reasonable excuse, seven miners, two nights back, had abused the boy cruelly and repeatedly—hence his limp.

Jahor let him stand there, mouthing tiny drops that glittered on his crusted lips, and went into the tent. "Madame, I—"

The Vizerine turned in the tent corner. "I have changed my mind." She frowned beneath the black hair (dyed now) braided in many loops across her forehead. From a tiny taboret, she picked up a thin-necked, copper cruet and reached up between the brass chains to pour out half a cup more oil. The lamp flared. She replaced the cruet on the low table. "Oh, Jahor, there must be *someone* there . . . you know what I like. Really, our tastes are not that

different. Try again. Bring me someone else."

Jahor touched the back of his fist to his forehead, nodded his blue-bound head, and withdrew.

After returning Noyeed to his barracks, Jahor had no trouble with his next selection. When he had first come rattling the barred door of the overseer's cabin, he had been testily sent in among the slat-walled barracks, with a sleepy guard for guide, to seek out one of the gang-foremen. In the foul sleeping quarters, the great, burly slave whom Jahor had shaken awake first cursed the steward like a dog, then, when he heard the Vizerine's request, laughed. The tall fellow had gotten up, taken Jahor to another, even fouler barracks, found Noyeed for him, and all in all seemed a congenial sort. With his scarred and pugnacious face and dirt-stiffened hair he was no one's hand-some. But he was animalily strong, of a piece, and had enough pit-dirt ground into him to satisfy anyone's *nostalgie de la boue*, thought Jahor, as the foreman lumbered off back to his own sleeping shack.

When, for the second time that night the guard unlocked the double catch at each side of the plank across the barrack entrance, Johar pushed inside, stepping from the rain and across the sill to flooring as muddy within as without. The guard stepped in behind, holding up the spitting pine-torch: smoke licked the damp beams; vermin scurried in the light or dropped down to the dirt. Jahor picked his way across muddy straw, went to the first heap curled away from him in thatch and shadow. He stopped, pulled aside frayed canvas.

The great head rolled up; red eyes blinked over a heavy hairy arm. "Oh . . ." the slave grunted. "You again?"

"Come with me," Johar said. "She wants you now."

The reddened eyes narrowed; the slave pushed up on one great arm. His face crinkled around his scar. With his free hand he rubbed his massive neck, the skin stretched between thick thumb and horny forefinger cracked and grey. "She wants me to . . . ?" Again he frowned. Suddenly he went scrabbling in the straw beside him and a moment later turned back with the metal collar, hinged open, a semicircle of it in each huge hand. Once he shook his head, as if to rid it of sleep. Straw fell from his hair, slid across his bunched shoulders. Then he bent forward, raised the collar, and clacked it closed; matted hair caught in the clasp at the back of his neck. Digging with one thick finger, he pulled it loose. "There . . ." He rose from his pallet to stand among the sleeping slaves, looking twice his size in the barracks shadow. His eyes caught the big-nosed eunuch's. He grinned, rubbed the metal ring with three fingers. "Now they'll let me back in. Come on, then."

So Gorgik came, with Jahor, to the Vizerine's tent.

And passed the night with Myrgot—who was forty-five and, in the narrowly restricted area she allowed for personal life, rather a romantic. The most passionate, not to say the most perverse, love-making (we are not talking about foreplay), though it run the night's course, seldom

takes more than twenty minutes from the hour. As boredom was Myrgot's problem and lust only its emblem, here and there through the morning hours the pit-slave found himself disposed in conversation with the Vizerine. Since there is very little entertainment for pit-slaves in an obsidian mine *except* conversation and tall-tale telling, when Gorgik began to see her true dilemma, he obliged her with stories of his life before and at the mines—a few of which tales were lies appropriated from other slaves, a few of which were embroideries on his own childhood experiences. But since entertainment was the desired effect, and temporariness seemed the evening's hallmark, there was no reason to shun prevarication.

Five times during the night, he made jokes the Vizerine thought wickedly funny. Three times he made observations on the working of the human heart she thought astonishingly profound. For the rest, he was deferential, anecdotal, as honest about his feelings as someone might be who sees no hope in his situation. Gorgik's main interest in the encounter was the story it would make at the next night's supper of gruel and cold pig fat, though that interest was somewhat tempered by the prospect of the ten hour workday with no sleep to come. Without illusion that more gain other than the tale would accrue, lying on his back on sweaty silk his own body had soiled, and staring up at the dead lamps swaying under the striped canvas, sometimes dozing in the midst of his own ponderings while the Vizerine beside him gave her own opinions on this, that, or the other, he only hoped there would be no higher price.

When the slits between the tent lacings turned luminous, the Vizerine suddenly sat up in a rustle of silks and a whisper of furs whose splendour had by now become part of the glister of Gorgik's fatigue; she called sharply for Jahor, then bade Gorgik rise and stand outside.

Outside, Gorgik stood, tired, light headed, and naked on the moist grass, already worn here and there to the earth with the previous goings and comings of the caravan personnel; he looked at the tents, at the black mountains beyond them, at the cloudless sky already gilded one side along the pinetops: I could run, he thought; and if I ran, yes, I would stumble into slaves' hands within the day; and I'm too tired anyway. But I could run. I . . .

Inside, Myrgot, with sweaty silk bunched in her fists beneath her chin, head bent and rocking slowly, considered: "You know, Jahor," she said, her voice quiet, because it was morning and if you have lived most of your life in a castle with many other people you are quiet in the morning, "that man is wasted in the mines." The voice had been roughened by excess. "I say man; he looks like a man; but he's really just a boy—oh, I don't mean he's a genius or anything. But he can speak two languages passably, and can practically read in one of them. For him to be sunk in an obsidian pit is ridiculous! And do you know . . . I'm the first woman he's ever had?"

Outside, Gorgik, still standing, his eyes half closed, was still thinking: Yes, perhaps I could . . . when Jahor came for him.

"Come with me."

"Back to the pit?" Gorgik snorted something that general good nature made come out half a laugh.

"No," Jahor said briskly and quietly in a way that made the slave frown. "To my tent."

Gorgik stayed in the large-nosed eunuch's tent all morning, on sheets and coverlets not so fine as the Vizerine's but fine enough; and the tent's furnishings—little chairs, low tables, shelves, compartmented chests, and numberless bronze and ceramic figurines set all over—were far more opulent than Myrgot's austere appointments. With

forty minutes this hour and forty minutes that, Jahor found the slave gruff, friendly—and about as pleasant as an exhausted miner can be at four, five, or six in the morning. He corroborated the Vizerine's assessment—and Jahor had done things—very much like this many, many times. At one point the big-nosed eunuch rose from the bed, bound himself about with blue wool, turned to excuse himself a moment—unnecessarily, because Gorgik had fallen immediately to sleep—and went back to the Vizerine's tent.

Exactly what transpired there, Gorgik never learned. One subject, from time to time in the discussion, would no





doubt have surprised, if not shocked, him: When the Vizerine had been much younger, she herself had been taken a slave for three weeks and forced to perform services arduous and demeaning, all for a provincial potentate—who bore such a resemblance to her present cook at Court that it all but kept her out of the kitchen. She had *only* been a slave for three weeks; an army had come, fire-arrows had lanced through the narrow stone windows, and the potentate's ill-shaven head was hacked off and tossed in the firelight from spear to spear by several incredibly dirty, incredibly tattooed soldiers so vicious and shrill that she finally decided (from what they later did to two women of the potentate's entourage in front of everyone) they were insane.

The soldiers' chief, however, was in alliance with her uncle; and she had been returned to him comparatively unharmed. But the whole experience had been enough to make her decide that the institution of slavery was totally distasteful and so was the institution of war—that, indeed, the only excuse for the latter was in the termination of the former. Such experiences, among an aristocracy deposed by the dragon for twenty years and only recently returned to power, were actually rather common, even if the ideas

taken from them were not. The present government did not as an official policy oppose slavery, but it did not go out of its way to support it either; and the Child Empress herself, whose reign was proud and prudent, had set a tradition in which no slaves were used at court.

From dreams of hunger and pains in his gut and groin, where a one-eyed boy with clotted mouth and scaly hands tried to tell him something he could not understand, but which seemed desperately important that he know, Gorgik woke with the sun in his face; the tent was being taken down from over him. A blue-turbaned head blocked the light: "Oh, you *are* awake. . . . Then you'd better come with me." With the noise of the decamping caravan around them Jahor took Gorgik to see the Vizerine; bluntly she informed him, while ox drivers, yellow-turbaned secretaries, red-scarved maids, and harnessed porters came in and out of the tent, lifting, carrying, unlacing throughout the interview, that she was taking him to Kolhari under her protection. He had been purchased from the mines—take off that collar and put it somewhere. At least by day. She would trust him never to speak to her unless she spoke to him first: —He was to understand that if she suspected her decision were a mistake, she could and would make his life far more miserable than it had ever been in the mines.

Gorgik was at first not so much astonished as comprehending; then, when astonishment, with comprehension, formed, he began to babble his inarticulate thanks—till, of a sudden, he became confused again and disbelieving and so, as suddenly, stopped. (Myrgot merely assumed he had realized that even gratitude is best displayed in moderation, which she took as another sign of his high character and her right choice.) Then men were taking the tent down from around them too. With narrowed eyes, Gorgik looked at the thin woman, in the green shift and sudden sun, sitting at a table from which women in red scarves were already removing caskets, things rolled and tied in ribbons, instruments of glass and bronze. Was she suddenly smaller? The thin braids, looped bright black about her head, looked artificial, almost like a wig (he knew they weren't). Her dress seemed made for a woman fleshier, broader. She looked at him, the skin near her eyes wrinkled in the bright morning, her neck a little loose, the veins on the back of her hands as high from age as those on his from labor. What he did realize, as she blinked in the full sunlight, was that he must suddenly look as different to her as she looked to him.

Jahor touched Gorgik's arm, led him away.

Gorgik had at least ascertained that his new and precarious position meant keeping silent. The caravan master put him to work grooming oxen by day, which he liked. For the next two weeks he spent his nights in the Vizerine's tent. And dreams of the mutilated child only woke him with blocked throat and wide eyes perhaps half a dozen times. And he was probably dead by now anyway, as Gorgik had watched dozens of other slaves die in those oddly fading years.

Once Myrgot was assured that, during the day, Gorgik could keep himself to himself, she became quite lavish with gifts of clothing, jewels, and trinkets. (Though she herself never wore ornaments when traveling, she carried trunks of such things in her train.) Jahor—in whose tent from time to time Gorgik spent a morning or afternoon—advised him of the Vizerine's moods, of when he should come to her smelling of oxen and wearing the grimy, leather-belted rag—with his slave collar—that was all he had taken from the mines. Or when, as happened more and more frequently over the second week, he should do better to arrive freshly washed, his beard shaved, disporting her various gifts; more important, he was advised when he should be prepared to make love, and when he should be ready simply to tell tales or, as it soon came to, just to listen. And Gorgik began to learn that most valuable of lessons without which no social progress is possible: If you are to stay in the good graces of the powerful, you had best, however unobtrusively, please the servants of the powerful.

One morning the talk through the whole caravan was: "Kolhari by noon!"

By nine a silver thread, winding off between fields and cypress glades, had widened into a reed-bordered river down below the bank of the caravan road. The Kohra, one groom told him, which made Gorgik start. He had known the Big Kohra and the Kohra Spur as two walled and garbage-clotted canals, moving sluggishly into the harbor from beneath a big and a little rock-walled bridge at the lower end of New Pavé. The hovels and filthy alleys in the city between (also called the Spur) were home to thieves, pick-pockets, murderers, and worse—he'd been told.

Here, on this stretch of the river, were great, high houses, of three and even four stories, widely spaced and frequently gated. Where were they now? Why, this was Kolhari—at least the precinct. They were passing through the suburb of Neveryona (which so recently had named the entire port) where the oldest and richest of the city's aristocracy dwelt . . . not far in that direction was the suburb of Sallëse, where the rich merchants and importers had their homes; though with less land and no prospect on the river, many of the actual houses there were far more elegant. This last was in conversation with a stocky woman—one of the red-scarfed maids—who frequently took off her sandals, hiked up her skirts, and walked among the ox drivers, joking with them in the roughest language. In the midst of her description, Gorgik was surprised by a sudden and startling memory: playing at the edge of a statue-ringed rock-pool in the garden of his father's employer on some unique trip to Sellese as a child; with the memory came the realization that he had not the faintest idea how to get from these wealthy environs to the waterfront neighborhood that was *his* Kolhari. Minutes later, as the logical solution (follow the Kohra) came, the caravan began to swing off the river road.

First in an overheard conversation among the caravan

master and some grooms, then in another between the chief porter and the matron of attendant women, Gorgik heard: ". . . the High Court . . .," ". . . the Court . . .," and ". . . the High Court of Eagles . . .," and one sweaty-armed, black driver, whose beast was halted on the road with a cartwheel run into a ditch, wrestled and cursed his heavy-lidded charge as Gorgik passed: "By the Child Empress, whose reign is good and gracious, I'll break your flea-bitten neck! So close to home, and you run off the path!"

An hour on the new road, which wound back and forth between the glades of cypress, and Gorgik was not sure if the Kohra was to his right or left.

But ahead was a wall, with guard houses left and right of a gate over which a chipped and rough-carved eagle spread her man-length wings. Soldiers pulled back the massive planks (with their dozen barred insets), then stood back, joking with one another, as the carts rolled through.

Was that great building beside the lake the High Court?

No, merely one of the outbuildings. Look there, above that hedge of trees. . . ?

There. . . ?

He hadn't seen it because it was too big. And when he did, rising and rising above the evergreens, for half a dozen seconds he tried to shake loose from his mind the idea that he was looking at some natural object, like the Falthus themselves—oh, yes, cut into here, leveled off there, but building upon building, wing upon wing, more like a city than a single edifice—that great pile (and he kept trying to separate it into *different* buildings, but it all seemed, despite its many levels, and its outcroppings, and its abutments, one) could not have been built. . . ?

He kept wishing the caravan would halt so he could look at it all. But the road was carpeted with needles now; and evergreens swatted half-bare branches across the towers, the clouds, the sky. Then, for a few moments, a grey wall was coming toward him, was towering over him, was about to fall on him in some infinitely delayed topple—

Jahor was calling.

Gorgik looked down from the parapet.

The eunuch motioned him to follow the dozen women who had separated from the caravan—among them the Vizerine; a tiny door swallowed them one and another into the building. Gorgik had to duck.

As bits of conversation babbled along the echoing corridor, past more soldiers standing in their separate niches (" . . . home at last . . .," ". . . what an exhausting trip . . .," ". . . here at home in Kolhari . . .," ". . . when one returns home to the High Court . . .," ". . . only in Kolhari . . ."), Gorgik realized that, somehow, all along he had been expecting to come to his childhood home; and that, rather than coming home at all, he had no idea *where* he was.

Gorgik spent five months at the High Court of the Child Empress Ynelgo. The Vizerine put him in a small, low ceilinged room, with a slit window (just behind her own suite); the stones of the floor and walls were all out of line

and missing mortar as though the pressures from the rock above, below, and around it had compacted the little chamber out of shape. By the end of the first month, both the Vizerine (and her steward) had all but lost interest in him. But several times before her interest waned, she had presented him at various private suppers (of seven to fourteen guests) in the several dining rooms of her suite, all with beamed ceilings and tapestried walls, some with wide windows opening out on sections of roof, some windowless with whole walls of numberless lamps and ingenious flues to suck off the fumes. Here he met some of her Court friends, a number of whom found him interesting, and three of whom actually befriended him. At one such supper he talked too much; at two more he was too silent. At the other six, however, he acquitted himself well, for seven to fourteen is the number a mine slave usually dines with; and he was comfortable with the basic structures of communication by which such a group (whether seated on logs and rocks, or cushions and couches) comports itself at meals, if not with the forms of politeness this particular group's expression of those structures had settled on. But those could be learned. And he learned them.

He had immediately seen there was no way to compete with the aristocrats in sophistication; he intuited that they would only be offended, or worse, bored, if he tried. What interested them in him was his difference from them. And to their credit (or the credit of the Vizerine's wise selection of supper guests), for the sake of this interest (and affection for the Vizerine), they made allowances (in ways he was only to appreciate years later) when he drank too much, or expressed like or dislike for one of their number not present a little too freely, or when his language became too hot on whatever topic was about—most of the time to accuse them of nonsense or of playing with him, coupled with good-natured but firm threats of what he would do to them were they on his territory rather than he on theirs.

Their language, polished and mellifluous, flowed, between bouts of laughter in which his indelicacies were generously absorbed and forgiven (if not forgotten), over subjects ranging from the scandalous to the scabrous: when Gorgik could follow it, it often made his mouth drop, or at least his teeth open behind his lips. His language, blunt and blistered with scatologs that frequently upped the odd aristocratic eyebrow, adhered finally to a very narrow range: the fights, feuds, and scrabbings for tiny honors, petty dignities, and minuscule assertions of rights among slaves and thieves, dock-beggars and prostitutes, sailors and barmaids and more slaves—people, in short, with no power beyond their voices, fingers, or feet—a subject rendered acceptable to the fine folk of the court only by his basic anecdotal talent and the topic's novelty in a setting where boredom was the greatest affliction.

Gorgik did not find the social strictures on his relations with the Vizerine demeaning. The Vizerine worked—the sort of work only those in art or government can really know, where the hours were seldom defined and the real tasks were seldom put in simple terms (while false tasks

always were). Conferences and consultations made up her day. At least two meals out of every three were spent with some ambassador, governor, or petitioner, if not at some affair of state. To do her credit, in that first month, we can thus account for all twenty-two evening meals Myrgot did not share with her slave.

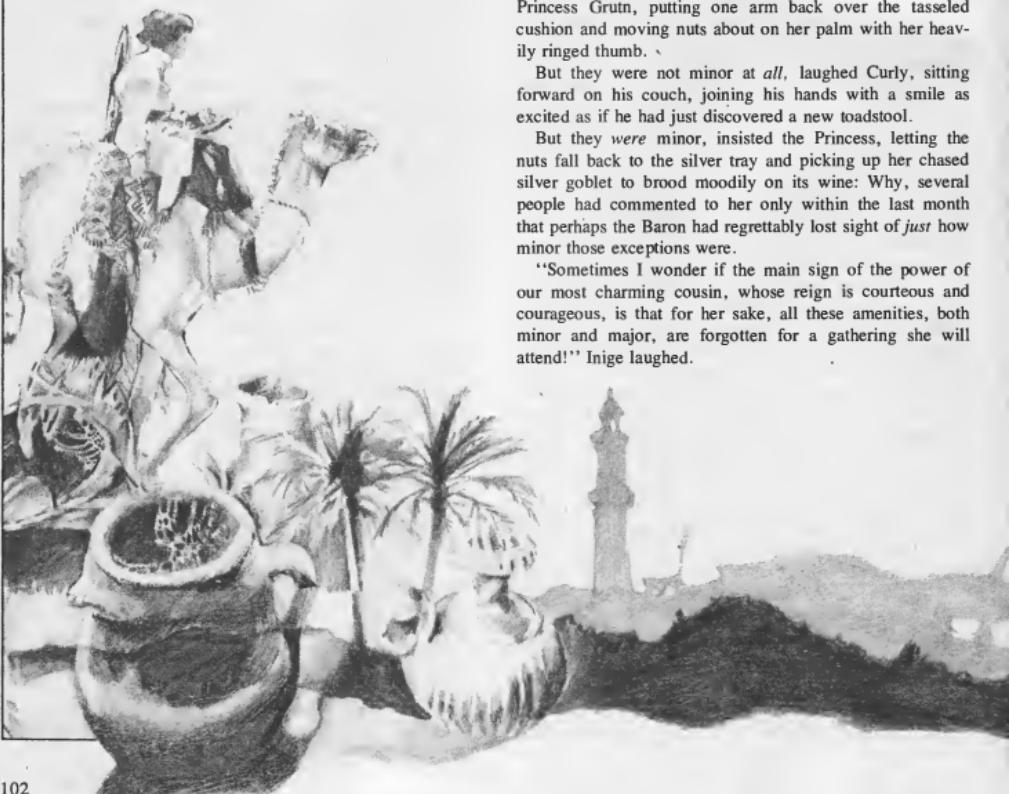
Had her slave, indeed, spent his past five years as, say, a free, clever, and curious apprentice to a well-off potter down in the port, he might have harbored some image of a totally leisured and totally capricious aristocracy, for which there were certainly enough emblems around him now, but which emblems, had he proceeded on them, as certainly would have gotten him into trouble. Gorgik, however, had passed too much of his life at drudgeries he knew would, foreman or no, probably kill him in another decade and certainly in two; he was too dazzled by his own, unexpected freedom from such drudgeries to question how others drudged. To pass the Vizerine's open door and see Myrgot at her desk, head bent over a map, a pair of compasses in one hand and a straight edge in the other (which to that clever, curious, and ambitious apprentice would have signed work) and then to pass the same door later and see her standing beside her desk, looking vacantly toward some cloud passing by the high, beveled window (which, to the same apprentice, would have signed a leisure that could reasonably be intruded upon, thus making her order never to intrude appear, for a lover at any rate, patently unreasonable), were states he simply did not distinguish: their textures were both so rich, so complex, and so unusual to him that he read no structure of meaning in either, much less did he read the meaning of those structures somehow as constituting opposition. In obeying the Vizerine's restriction, and not intruding on either situation, his reasons were closer to something aesthetic than practical. Gorgik was acting on that disposition for which the apprentice would have despised him as the slave he was: He knew his place.

Yet that apprentice's valuation would have been too coarse, for the truth is that in such society, Gorgik—no more than a potter's boy—had no place . . . if we use "to have" other than in that mythical (and mystifying) sense in which both a slave *has* a master and good people *have*



certain rights, but rather in the sense of possession that implies some way (either through power or convention) of enforcing that possession, if not to the necessary extent, at least to a visible one. Had Gorgik suddenly developed a disposition to intrude, from, some rage grown either in whim or reason, he would have intruded on either situation—a disposition that his aristocratic supper companions would have found more sympathetic than the apprentice's presumptions, assumptions, and distinctions all to no use. Our potter's boy would no doubt have gotten himself turned out of the castle, thrown into one of the High Court's lower dungeons, or killed—for these were barbaric times, and the Vizerine was frequently known to be both violent and vicious. Had Gorgik intruded, yes, the aristocrats would have been in far greater sympathy with him—as they had him turned out, thrown in a dungeon, or killed. No doubt this means the distinction is finally of little use. But we are trying to map the borders of the disposition that was, indeed, the case. Gorgik, who had survived on the water-front, and survived in the mine, survived at the High Court of Eagles. To do it, he had to learn a great deal.

Not allowed to approach the Vizerine and constrained to



wait till she approached him, he learned, among the first lessons, that there was hardly one person at court who was not, practically speaking, in a similar position with at least one other person—if not whole groups. Thus the Suzerain of Vanar (who shared Jahor's tastes and gave Gorgik several large rocks with gems embedded in them that lay in the corners of Gorgik's room, gathering dust) and the Baron Inige (who did not, but who once took him hunting in the royal preserves and talked endlessly about flowers throughout the breadth of the Neveryon—and from whom Gorgik now learned that an *ini*, which brought back a raft of memories from his dockside adolescence, was deadly poison) would never attend the same function, though both must always be invited. The Thane of Saleema could be invited to the same gathering as Lord Ekoris *unless* the Countess Esulla was to be present—however, in such cases Curly (the Baron Inige's nickname) would be excused. No one known as a friend of Lord Aldamir (who had not been at Court now for seven years, though everyone seemed to remember him with fondness) should be seated next to, or across from, any relative, unto the second cousins, of the Baronine Jeu-Forsi. . . . Ah, but with perhaps half a dozen insistently minor exceptions, commented the young Princess Grutn, putting one arm back over the tasseled cushion and moving nuts about on her palm with her heavily ringed thumb. . . .

But they were not minor at all, laughed Curly, sitting forward on his couch, joining his hands with a smile as excited as if he had just discovered a new toadstool.

But they were minor, insisted the Princess, letting the nuts fall back to the silver tray and picking up her chased silver goblet to brood moodily on its wine: Why, several people had commented to her only within the last month that perhaps the Baron had regrettably lost sight of *just* how minor those exceptions were.

"Sometimes I wonder if the main sign of the power of our most charming cousin, whose reign is courteous and courageous, is that for her sake, all these amenities, both minor and major, are forgotten for a gathering she will attend!" Inige laughed.

And Gorgik, sitting on the floor, picked his teeth with a silver knife whose blade was shorter than his little finger and listened—not with the avidity of a social adventurer storing information for future dealings with the great, but with the relaxed attention of an aesthete hearing for the first time a difficult poem, which he already knows from the artist's previous work will require many exposures before its meaning truly clears.

Our young potter's boy would have brought with him to these same supper a ready-made image of the pyramid of power, and no doubt in the light of these arcane informations tried to map the whole volume of that pyramid onto the single line, with every thane and duchess in place, each above this one and below that one, the whole forming a line that could be negotiated, a line that presumably ended at some *one*—perhaps the Child Empress Ynelgo herself. Gorgik, because he brought to the supper rooms no such preconceptions, soon learned, between evenings with the Vizerine, dawn rides with the Baron, afternoon gatherings in the Old Hall, arranged by the young Earls Jue-Grun (not to be confused with the two older men who bore the same title, the bearded one of which was said to be either insane, a sorcerer, or both), or simply from gatherings overseen and overheard in his wanderings through the chains of rooms which formed the Middle Style of the castle, that the hierarchy of prestige branched; that the branches interwove; and that the interweavings in several places formed perfectly closed, if inexplicable, loops; as well, he observed that the presence of this earl or that thane (not to mention this steward or that attendant maid) could throw a whole subsection of the system into a different linking altogether.

Jahor, especially during the first weeks, took many walks with Gorgik through the castle: the eunuch steward was hugely rich in information about the architecture itself; the building still mystified the miner. The oldest wings, like the Old Hall, were vast, cavernous spaces, with open roofs and water conduits grooved into the floor; dozens of small, lightless cells opened off them, the upper ones reached by wooden ladders, stone steps, or sometimes mere mounds of earth heaped against the wall. Centuries ago, Jahor explained, these dusty, dank cavelots, smaller even than Gorgik's present room, had actually been the dwelling places of great kings, queens, and courtiers. From time to time they had housed officers of the army—and, during the several occupations, common soldiers.

That little door up there, sealed over with stone and no steps to it? Centuries before, Mad Queen Olin had been walled there after she had presided at a banquet in this

very hall, at which she served her own twin sons, their flesh roasted, their organs pickled. Halfway through the meal, a storm had burst over the castle, and rain had poured through the broad roof-opening, while lightning fluttered and flickered its pale whips; but Olin forbade her guests to rise from the table before the feast was consumed. It's still debatable, quipped the eunuch, whether they entombed her because of the supper or the soaking. (*Olin*, thought Gorgik, *Olin's warning . . . ?* But Jahor was both talking and walking on.)

Today, except for the Old Hall that was kept in some use, these ancient echoing wells were deserted, the cells were empty, or at best used to store objects that had grown useless, if not meaningless, with rust, dust, and time. About fifty or a hundred years ago, some particularly clever artisan—the same who laid out the New Pavé down in the port, Jahor explained, waking Gorgik's wandering attention again—had come up with the idea of the corridor (as well as the coin-press). At least half the castle had been built since then (and most of the Neveryon money minted); for at least half the castle had its meeting rooms and storerooms, its kitchens and its living quarters, laid out along corridors. There were six whole, many-storied wings of them. In the third floor of one of the newest, the Vizerine had her suite; in the second and third floor of one of the oldest, most business of state was carried on around the throne room of the Child Empress. For the rest, the castle was built in that strange and disconcerting method known as the Middle Style, in which rooms, on two sides, three sides, four sides, and sometimes with steps going up, opened onto other rooms; which opened onto others—big rooms, little rooms, some empty, some lavishly appointed, many without windows, some incredibly musty; and frequently two or three perfectly dark ones, that had to be traversed with torch and taper, lying between two that were in current, active use, like a vast and hopeless hive.

Did Jahor actually know his way around the *entire* edifice?

No one knew his way around the entire Court. Indeed, though his mistress went occasionally, Jahor had never been anywhere near the Empress's suite or the throne room. He knew the location of the wing only by report.

What about the Child Empress herself? Did she know all of it?

Oh, especially not the Child Empress herself, Jahor explained, an irony which our potter might have questioned, but which was just another strangeness to the pit-slave.

But it was after that conversation that Jahor's company too began to fall off.

Gorgik's aristocratic friends had a particularly upsetting habit: One day they would be perfectly friendly, if not downright intimate; the next afternoon, if they were walking with some companion unknown to Gorgik, they would pass him in some rocky corridor and not even deign recognition—even if he smiled, raised his hand, or started



to speak. Such snubs and slights would have provoked our potter, however stoically he forbore, to who-knows-what final outburst, ultimate indelicacy, or denunciation of the whole, undemocratic sham. But though Gorgik saw quite well he was the butt of such behavior more than they, he saw too that they treated him thus not because he was different so much as because that was the way they treated each other.

The social hierarchy and patterns of deference to be learned here were as complex as those that had to be mastered—even by a foreman—on moving into a new slave-barracks in the mine. (Poor potter! With all his simplistic assumptions about the lives of aristocrats, he would have had just as many about the lives of slaves.) Indeed, among slaves Gorgik knew what generated such complexity: servitude itself. The only question he could not answer here was: what were all *these* elegant lords and ladies slaves to? In this, of course, the potter would have had the advantage of knowledge. The answer was simple: power, pure, raw, and obsessive. But in his ignorance, young Gorgik was again closer to the lords and ladies around him than an equally young potter's boy would have been. For it is precisely at its center that one loses the clear vision of what surrounds, what controls and contours every utterance, decides and develops every action, as the bird has no clear concept of air, though it supports her every turn, or the fish no true vision of water, though it blurs all she sees. A goodly, if not frightening, number of these same lords and ladies dwelling at the Court had as little idea of what shaped their every willed decision, conventional observance, and sheer, unthinking habit, as did Gorgik—whereas the potter's boy Gorgik might have been, had the play of power five years before gone differently in these same halls and hives, would not even have had to ask.

For all the temperamental similarities we have drawn, Gorgik was not (nor should we be) under any illusion that either the lords or their servants accepted him as one of them. But he had conversation; he had companionship—for some periods extremely warm companionship—from women and men who valued him for much the same reason as the Vizerine had. He was fed; he was given frequent gifts. From time to time people in rooms he was not in and never visited suggested to one another that they look out for the gruff youngster in the little room on the third floor, see that he was fed, or that he was not left too much alone. (And certainly a few times when such conversations might have helped, they never occurred.) But Gorgik, stripped to nothing but his history, began to learn that even such a history—on the docks and in the mines—as it set him apart in experience from these others, was in some small way the equivalent of an aristocracy in itself: those who met him here at Court either did not bother him about it, or they respected it and made allowances for his eccentricities because of it—which is, after all, all their own aristocratic privileges gained them from one another.

Once he went five days in the castle without eating. When Gorgik did not have an invitation to some Countess's or Prince's dinner or luncheon, he went to the Vizerine's kitchen to eat—Jahor had left standing instructions there that he was to be fed. But the Vizerine, with most of her suite, was away on another mission. And since the Vizerine's cooks had gone with the caravan, her kitchen had been shut down.

One evening the little Princess Elyne took both Gorgik's great hands in her small, brown ones and exclaimed, as the other guests departed around them, "But I have had to cancel the little get together that I'd asked you to tomorrow. It is too terrible! But I must go visit my uncle, the Count, who will not be put off another—" Here she stopped, pulled one of her hands away and put it over her mouth. "But I am terrible. For I'm lying dreadfully, and you probably know it, too! Tomorrow I must go home to my own horrid old castle, and I loathe it, loathe it there! Ah, you *did* know it, but you're too polite to say anything."

Gorgik, who'd known no such thing, laughed.

"So," went on the little Princess, "that is why I must cancel the party. You see, I have reasons. You *do* understand . . . ?"

Gorgik, who was vaguely drunk, laughed again, shook his head, raised his hand when the Princess began to make more excuses, and, still laughing, turned, and found his way back to his room.

The next day, as had happened before, no other invitations came; and because the Vizerine's kitchen was closed, he did not eat. The next day there were still no invitations. He scoured as much of the castle as he dared for Curly, and became suddenly aware of how little of the castle he felt comfortable wandering in. The third day? Well, the first two days of a fast are the most difficult, though Gorgik had no thoughts of fasting. He was not above begging, but he could not see how to beg here from someone he hadn't been introduced to. Steal? Yes, there were other suites, other kitchens. (Ah, it was now the fourth day; and other than being a little lightheaded, his actual appetite seemed to have died somewhere inside him.) Steal food . . . ?

He sat on the edge of his raised pallet, his fists a great, horny knot of interlocked knuckles and thickened nail, pendant between his knees. How many times had these lords and ladies praised his straightforwardness, his honesty? He had been stripped to nothing but his history, and now that history included their evaluations of him. Though both on the docks and in the mines no month had gone by since age six when he had not pilfered *something*, he'd stolen nothing here, and somehow he knew that to steal—here—meant losing part of this new history; and, in this mildly euphoric state, that new history seemed much too valuable—because it was associated with real learning (rather than with ill-applied judgments, which is what it would have meant for our young potter; and our young



potter, though he had never stolen more than the odd cup from his master's shelf of seconds, would certainly have stolen now).

Gorgik had no idea how long it took to starve to death. But he had seen ill-fed men, worked fourteen hours a day, thrown into solitary confinement without food for three days, only to die within a week after their release. (And had once, in his first six months at the mines, been so confined himself; and had survived.) That a well fed woman or man of total leisure (and leisure is all Gorgik had known for close to half a year) might go more than a month with astonishing ease on nothing but water never occurred to him.

On the fifth day he was still light-headed, not hungry, and extremely worried over the possibility that this sensation itself was the beginning of starving to death.

In his sandals with the brass buckles, and a red smock which hung to mid-thigh (it should have been worn with an ornamental collar he did not bother to put on, and should have been belted with a woven sash of scarlet and gold, wrapped three times around the waist with the tassels hanging to the floor; but absently he had wrapped round it the old leather strap he'd used to girdle his loin-rag in the mines), he left his room on the evening of the fifth day and again began to wander the castle. This time, perhaps because of the light-headedness, he entered a hallway he had never entered before, and immediately found himself in a circular stone stairwell. On a whim, he went up instead of down; after two circuits, the stairwell opened on another hallway—no, it was a roofed colonnade: through the arches, the further crenellations and parapets of the castle interrupted a night misted by moonlight while the moon itself was somewhere out of sight.

At the colonnade's end, another stairwell took him back down among cool rocks. About to leave the stairwell at

one exit because there was a faint glimmer of lamps somewhere off in the distance, he realized that what he'd taken for a buzzing in his own ears was really—blurred by echoing stones—conversation and music from further below. Wondering if perhaps some catered gathering large enough to absorb him were going on, with one hand on the wall, he descended the narrow spiral of stone.

In the vestibule at the bottom hung a bronze lamp. But the vestibule's hangings were so dreary the tiny chamber still looked black. The attention of the soldier in the archway was all on the sumptuous, bright crowds within. When, after half a dozen heartbeats' hesitation, Gorgik walked out into the crowded hall, he was not detained.

Were there a hundred people in this brilliant room? Passing among them, he saw the Baron Curly; and the Countess Esulla; and over there the young Princess Grun was talking with a dour, older gentleman (the Earl of Jeu-Cirutn); and that was the Suzerain of Vanar! On the great table running the whole side of the room sat tall decanters of wine, wide bowls of fruit, platters of jellied welkin, circular loaves of hard bread and rounds of soft cheese. Gorgik knew that if he gorged himself he would be ill; and that, even if he ate prudently, within an hour of his first bite, his bowels would void themselves of five days' bile—in short, knew what a man who had lived near hunger for five years needed to know of hunger to survive. Nevertheless, he made slow circuit after slow circuit of the hall; each time he passed the table, he took a fruit or a piece of bread.

On the seventh round, because the food whipped up an astonishing thirst, he poured himself a large goblet of wine; three sips and it went to his head like a torrent reversing itself to crash back up the rocks. He wondered if he would be sick. The music was reeds and drums. The musicians, in great headdresses of gilded feathers and little else, wandered through the crowd, somehow managing to



keep their insistent rhythms and reedy whines together.

It was on the seventh round, with the goblet still in his hand and his stomach like a small, swollen bag swinging back and forth uneasily inside him, that a thin girl with a brown, wide face and a sleeveless white shift high on her neck and down to the floor said, "Sir, you are not dressed for this party!" Which was true.

Her rough hair was braided around her head, so tight you could see her scalp between the spiralling tiers.

Gorgik smiled and dropped his head just a little—that was the way you talked with aristocrats. "I'm not really a guest. I am a most presumptuous interloper here—a hungry man." While he kept his smile, his stomach suddenly cramped, then—very slowly—unknotted.

The girl's sleeves, high off her bare, brown shoulders, were circled with tiny diamonds. Around her forehead ran the thinnest of silver wires, set every inch with small, bright stones. "You are from the mines, aren't you—the Vizerine's favorite and the pet of Lord Aldamir's circle."

"I have never met Lord Aldamir," Gorgik said. "Though everyone I have met here at the Court speaks of him with regard."

To which the girl looked absolutely blank for another moment; then she laughed, a high and childish laugh that had in it a hysterical edge he had not heard before in any of his courtier acquaintances' merriment. The Empress Ynelgo would certainly not have you put out just because your clothes are poor—though, really, if you were going to come, you might have shown *some* consideration."

"The Empress's reign is just and generous," Gorgik said, because that's what people always said at any mention of the Empress. "This will probably sound strange to such a well-bred little slip of a thing like yourself, but do you know that for the last five days I have not—" Someone touched his arm.

He glanced back to see Curly beside him.

"Your Highness," said the Baron, "have you been introduced to Gorgik yet? May I have the honor of presenting him to you? Gorgik, I present you to Her Majesty, the Child Empress Ynelgo."

Gorgik just remembered to press the back of his fist to his forehead. "Your Highness, I didn't know. . . ."

"Curly," the Child Empress said, "really, we've already met. But then, I can't really call you Curly in front of him, now, can I?"

"You might as well, Your Highness. He does."

"Ah, I see. Of course. I've heard a great deal about Gorgik already. Is it presumptuous to assume that you"—her large eyes, close to the surface of her face (like so many of the Neveryon aristocrats), came to Gorgik's—"have heard a great deal about me?" And then she laughed again, emerging from it with: "Curly . . . !" with a sharpness that apparently surprised the Baron as well.

"Your Highness." The Baron touched his fist to his forehead, and to Gorgik's distress, turned and walked away.

The Empress looked again at Gorgik with an expression intense enough to make him start to step back himself. She said: "Let me tell you what the most beautiful and distressing section of Neveryon's empire is, Gorgik. It is the province of Garth—especially the forests around the Vygernay Monastery. I was kept there as a child, before I was made Empress. They say the Elder Gods dwell somewhere in the ruins below it—and they are much older than the monastery. The lands are lush and lovely. I long to visit it again. But even today, there is more trouble from that little spit of land than any corner of the empire."

"I will remember what you have told me, Your Highness," Gorgik said, because he could think of no other rejoinder.

"It would be very well if you did." The Child Empress blinked. Suddenly she looked left, then right, bit her lip in a most unimperial way, and walked quickly away across the room. Threads of silver in the white shift glimmered.

"Isn't the Empress charming," Curly said, at Gorgik's shoulder once more; with his hand on Gorgik's arm, he was leading him away.

"El . . . yes. She . . . the Empress is charming," Gorgik said, because he had learned in the last months that when something must be said to fill the silence, but no one knows what, repetition of something said before will usually at least effect a delay.

"The Empress is perfectly charming," Curly went on as they walked. "The Empress is more charming than I've ever seen her before. Really, she is the most charming person in the entire Court. . . ."

Somewhere in the middle of this, Gorgik realized the Baron had no more idea what to say than Gorgik. They reached the door. The Baron lowered his voice and his largish Adam's apple rose behind his embroidered collar. "You have received the Empress's favor. Anything else the evening might offer you would undoubtedly be anti-climactic. Gorgik, you would be wise to retire from the party. . . ." Then, in a lower voice: "When I tell you, look to your left: You will see a gentleman in red look away from you just as you look at him. . . . All right: Now."

Gorgik looked: Across the hall, talking to a glittering group, an older man with a brown, bony face and grizzled white hair and a red cloak, a heavy copper chestpiece over his tunic, turned back to his conversation with two bejeweled women.

"Do you know who that is?"

Gorgik shook his head.

"That is Krodar. Please, look away from him now. I should not need to tell you that Neveryon is *his* Empire: his soldiers put the Empress on the throne; his forces have kept her there. More to the point, his forces threw down the previous and unmentionable residents of the High Court of Eagles. The power of the Child Empress Ynelgo is Krodar's power. While the Child Empress favored you with a moment's conversation, Krodar cast in your direc-

tion a frown which few in this company failed to notice." The Baron sighed. "So you see, your position here has completely changed."

"But how—? Of course I shall leave, but . . ." Feeling a sudden ominousness, Gorgik frowned, light-headed and bewildered. "I mean, I don't want anything from the Empress."

"There is no one in this room who does not want something from the Empress—including myself. For that reason alone, no one here would believe you—including myself."

"But—"

"You came to Court with the favor of the Vizerine. Everyone knows—or thinks they know—that such favor from Myrgot is only favor of the flesh, which they can gossip about, find amusing, and therefore tolerate. Most do not realize that Myrgot decides when to let such news of her favor enter the circuit of gossip—and that, in your case, such decision was made after your flesh ceased to interest her; and in such ways the rumor can be, and has been, 'put to use.' The Baron's Adam's apple bounded in his neck. "But, no one ever knows precisely what the Empress's favor means. No one is ever quite sure what use either she or you will make of it. Therefore, it is much more dangerous to have. And there is Krodar's disfavor to consider. For Krodar is the Empress's minister—her chief steward if you will. Can you imagine how difficult your life would have been here at Court if you had, say, the Vizerine's favor but Jahor's enmity?"

Gorgik nodded, now light-headed and ill. "Should I go to Krodar then and show him he has nothing to fear from—?"

"Krodar holds all the power of this Empire in his hands.

He is not 'afraid' of anyone. My friend—" the Baron put his pale hand up on Gorgik's thick shoulder and leaned close—"when you entered this game, you entered on the next to the highest level possible, and under the tutelage of one of its best players. You know that the Vizerine is not at Court and is not expected till tomorrow. Remember: so do the people who planned this party. There are *many* individual men and women in this very room, wearing enough jewelry tonight to buy a year's produce of the mine you worked in, who have struggled half their lives or more to arrive at a level in the play far below the one you began at. You were allowed to stay on that level because you had nothing and convinced those of us who met you that you wanted nothing. Indeed, for us, you were a relief from such murderous games."

"I was a miner, working fourteen hours a day in a pit that would have killed me in ten years; I am now . . . favored at the High Court of Eagles. What else could I want?"

"But you see, you have just moved from the next-to-highest level of play to the very highest. You come into a party to which you—and your protectress—were specifically not invited, dressed like a barbarian; and in five minutes you won a word from the Empress herself. Do you know that with fifteen minutes proper conversation with the proper people who are here tonight, you could parley that into a governorship of a fairly valuable, if outlying, province—more, if you were skillful. I do not intend to introduce you to those people, because just as easily you could win your death from someone both desperate for, and deserving of, the same position who merely lacked that all-important credential: a word from Her Majesty. The Empress knows all this; so does Krodar—that indeed may be why he frowned."

"But you spoke with—"

"Friend, I may speak with the Empress any time I wish. She is my second cousin once removed. When she was nine and I was twenty-three, we spent eight months together in the same dungeon cell, while our execution was put off day by day by day—but that was when she was still a princess. The Empress may *not* speak to me any



time she wishes, or she risks endangering the subtle balance of power between my forces at Yenla'h and hers at Egelt'on—should the wrong thane or princeling misconstrue her friendliness as a sign of military weakness and move his forces accordingly. My approaches to her, you see, are only considered nepotistic fawning. Hers to me are considered something else again. Gorgik, you have amused me. You have even tolerated my enthusiasm for botany. I don't want to hear that your corpse was pulled out of a sewage trough, or worse, was found floating somewhere in the Korha down in the port. And the excuse for such an outrage need easily be no more than Krodar's frown—if not the Empress's smile."

Gorgik stepped back, because his gut suddenly knotted. He began to sweat. But the Baron's thin fingers dug his shoulder, pulling him forward again:

"Do you understand? Do you understand that, minutes ago, you had nothing anyone here *could* have wanted? Do you understand that now you have what a third of us in this room have at least once committed murder for and the other two-thirds done far worse to obtain: an unsolicited word from the Empress."

Gorgik swayed. "Curly, I'm sick. I want a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine. . . ."

The Baron frowned. He looked around. They were standing by the table end. "There is a decanter; there is a loaf. And there is the door." The Baron shrugged. "Take the former and use the latter."

Gorgik took a breath which made the cloth of his tunic slide on his wet back. With a lurching motion, he picked up a loaf in one hand and a decanter in the other and lumbered through the arch.

A young Duchess, who had been standing only a few feet away, turned to Inige: "Do you know, if I'm not mistaken, I believe I just saw your inelegantly dressed companion who, only a moment ago, was conferring with Her Highness, do the *strangest* thing—"

"And do you know," said the Baron, taking her arm, "that two months by, when I was in the Zenari provinces, I saw the most remarkable species of schist-moss with a most uncharacteristic blossom. Let me tell you . . . " and he led her across the room.

Gorgik lurched through the dreary vestibule, once more unhindered by the guard; once he stopped to grasp the hangings, which released dust dragons to coil down about the decanter hooked to his thumb and his dribbling arm; he plunged into the stairwell.

He climbed.



Each time he came around the narrow circle, a sharp breeze caught him on the right side. Suddenly he stopped, dropped his head, and, still holding the decanter by his thumb, leaned his forearm high on the wall (the decanter clicked the stone) and vomited. And vomited again. And then again. Splattered and befoiled, his chin dripping, he began to shiver; the breeze scoured his right flank. Bread and bottle away from his sides, he climbed, pausing now and again to scrape his sandal soles on the bowed steps' edges, his skin crinkling with gooseflesh, teeth clattering.

The wide brass basin clattered and clinked in its ring. He finished washing himself, let the rag drop on the basin edge (weighted on one side, it ceased its tiny rocking), turned on the wet stones, stepped to his pallet, and stretched naked. The fur threw dampened beneath his wet hair, his cheek, his heavy legs, his shoulders. Each knob of bone on each knob felt awash at his body's joints. Belly and gut were still liquefactive, unsettled. Any movement might start the shivering and the teeth chattering again for ten, twenty seconds, a minute, or more. He turned on his back.

And shivered a while.

From time to time he reached from the bed to tear off a small piece from the loaf on the floor, sometimes dipping its edge in the chased silver beaker of wine that, with every third dip, he threatened to overturn on the flags. While he lay, listening to the nighthawks cooing beyond the hangings at his narrow window, he thought about where he'd first learned what happened to the body during days without food. After the fight that had gained him his scar, he'd been put in the solitary cell, foodless, for three days. Afterwards, an old slave whose name, for the life of him, he could not remember, had taken him back to the barracks, told him the symptoms to expect, and snored by his side for the first night.

Only a rich man who had no experience of the prison at all could have seriously considered the palace its equal. Still, minutes at a time, Gorgik could entertain the notion that the only difference between then and now was that—now—he was a little sicker, a little lonelier, and was in a situation where he had been forced, for reasons that baffled him, to pretend to be well and happy. Also, for five years he had done ten to fourteen hours a day hard labor; for almost five months now he had done nothing. In some ways his present illness merely seemed an extension of a feeling he'd had frequently of late: that his entire body was in a singular state of confusion about how to react to anything and that this confusion had nothing to do with his mind. And yet his mind found the situation confusing enough. For a while Gorgik thought about his parents. His father was dead—he'd watched the murder happen. His mother was . . . dead. He had heard enough to know any other assumption was as improbable as his arrival here at the High Court. These crimes had been committed at the ascent of the Child Empress, and her entourage, including

the Vizerine, Curly, the Princesses Elyne and Grutn, and Jahor; that was why he, Gorgik, had been taken a slave.

Perhaps, here at Court, he had even met the person who had given some order that, in the carrying out, had caused Gorgik's own life to veer as sharply from waterfront dock rat as it had recently veered away from pit-slave. Gorgik—he had not shivered for the last few minutes now—smiled wryly in the dark. Curly? The Vizerine? Krodar? The Child Empress herself? It was not a new thought; had he been insensitive enough never to have entertained it before, it might have infused him, in his weakness, with some sense of new power or purpose; he might even have experienced in his sickness a desire for revenge. But months ago he had, for good or bad, dismissed it as a useless one. Now, when it might, in its awkward way, have been some bitter solace, he found he could not keep it in the foreground of consciousness; it simply fragmented, the fragments dissolving into myriad flickers.

But he was, for all his unfocused thought, learning—still learning. He was learning that power—the great power that shattered lives and twisted the course of nations—was like a fog over a meadow at evening. From any distance, it seemed to have a shape, a substance, a color, an edge, yet as you approached it, it seemed to recede before you. Finally, when common sense told you you were at its very center, it still seemed just as far away, only by this time it was on all sides, obscuring any vision of the world beyond it. He lay on damp fur and remembered walking through such a foggy field in a line with other slaves, a chain heavy from his neck before and behind. Wet grass had whipped his legs; twigs and pebbles had bit through the mud that caked his feet; and then the vision flickered, fragmented, drifted. Lord Aldamir . . . ? Surfacing among all the names and titles with which his last months had been filled, this one now: Was this phenomenon he had noted the reason that such men who were truly concerned with the workings of power chose to stay away from its center, so that they might never lose sight of power's contours? And then that thought fragmented in a sudden bout of chills.

Toward dawn, footsteps in the corridor outside woke him; there, people were grunting with heavy trunks. People were passing, were talking less quietly than they might. He lay, feeling much better than when he had drifted to sleep, listening to the return of the Vizerine's suite. To date Gorgik had not violated the Vizerine's stricture on their intercourse. But shortly he rose, dressed, and went to Jahor's rooms to request an audience. Why? the eunuch asked, looking stern.

Gorgik told him, and told him also his plan.

The large-nosed eunuch nodded. Yes, that was probably very wise. But why didn't Gorgik go first to the Vizerine's kitchen and take a reasonable breakfast?

Gorgik was sitting on the corner of a large wood table, eating a bowl of gruel that the fat cook, whose hairy belly



pushed between the top of his stained apron and the bottom of his red singlet (already sweat-blotched from stoking the week-cold hearth), and joking with the sleepy kitchen girl, when Jahor stepped through the door: "The Vizerine will see you now."

"So," said Myrgot, one elbow on the parchment-strewn desk, running a thumb, on which she had already replaced the heavy rings of Court, over her forehead, a gesture Gorgik knew meant she was tired, "you had a word last night with our most grave and gracious Empress."

Which took Gorgik back; he had not even mentioned that to Jahor. "Curly left a message that greeted me at the door," the Vizerine explained. "Tell me what she said: everything. If you can remember it word for word, so much the better."

"She said she had heard of me. And that she would not have me put out of the party because my clothes were poor—"

Myrgot grunted. "Well, it's true. I have not been as munificent with you of late as I might have been—"

"My Lady, I make no accusation. I only tell you what she—"

The Vizerine reached across the desk, took Gorgik's great wrist. "I know you don't." She stood, still holding his arm, and came around to the side, where, as he had done in the kitchen a little while before, she sat down on the desk's corner. "Though any six of my former lovers—not to mention the present one—would have meant it as an accusation in the same situation. No, the accusation comes from our just and generous ruler herself." She patted his hand, then dropped it. "Go on."

"She nodded Curly—the Baron Inige, I mean—away. Then she said that the most beautiful and distressing section of Neveryon's empire is the province of Garth, especially the forests around some monastery—"

"The Vygernagx."

"Yes. She said she was kept there as a girl before she was Empress. Curly told me later about when the two of them were in prison—"

"I know all about that time. I was in a cell only two away from theirs. Go on with what she said."

"She said that the Elder Gods dwell there, and that they are even older than the monastery. She said that the lands were lush and lovely and that she longed to revisit it. But that even today there was more trouble from that little bit of land than from any other place in the Empire."

"And while she spoke with you thus, Krodar cast you a dark look . . . ?" The Vizerine dropped both hands to the desk. She sighed. "Do you know the Garth Peninsula?"

Gorgik shook his head.

"A brutish, uncivilized place—though the scenery is pretty enough. Every other old hovel one comes across houses a witch or a wizard, not to mention the occasional mad priest. And then, a few miles to the south, it is no longer forest but jungle; and there are nothing but barbar-

ian tribes. And the amount of worry it causes is absolutely staggering!" She sighed again. "Of course you know, Gorgik, that the Empress associates you with me. So any word spoken to you—or even a look cast your way—may be read in some way as a message intended for Myrgot."

"Then I hope I have not brought Myrgot an unhappy one."

"It's not a good one." The Vizerine sighed, leaned back a little on the desk, placing one fingertip on the shade of parchment. "For the Empress to declare the Elder Gods are older than the monastery is to concede me a theological point that I support and that, till now, she has opposed: over this point, many people have died. For her to say she wishes to go there is tantamount to declaring war on Lord Aldamir, in whose circle you and I both move, and who keeps his center of power there. For her to choose *you* to deliver this message is . . . But I shouldn't trouble you with the details of that meaning."

"Yes, My Lady. There is no need. My Lady—?"

The Vizerine raised her eyebrow.

"I asked to come and speak to you. Because I cannot stay here at Court any longer. What can I do to serve you in the outside world? Can I be a messenger for you? Can I work some bit of your land? Within the castle here there is nothing for me."

The Vizerine was silent long enough for Gorgik to suspect she disapproved of his request. "Of course you're right," she said at last, so that he was surprised and relieved. "No, you can't stay on here. Especially after last night. I suppose I could always return you to the mine . . . no, that is a tasteless joke. Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, My Lady," though Gorgik's heart had suddenly started. While it slowed, he ventured: "Any post you can put me to, I would most happily fill."

After another few moments, the Vizerine said: "Go now. I will send for you in an hour. By then we shall have decided what to do with you."

"You know, Jahor—" The Vizerine stood by the window, looking between the bars at the rain, at further battlements beyond the veils of water, the mansards and crenellations. "—he really is an exceptional man. After five months, he wishes to leave the castle. Think of many of the finest sons and daughters of provincial noblemen who, once presented here, become parasites and hangers on for five years or more—before they finally reach such a propitious decision as he has." Rain gathered on the bars and dripped, wetting inches of the beveled sill.

Jahor sat in the Vizerine's great curved back chair, rather slumped shouldered, and for all his greater bulk, filling it noticeably less well than she. "He was wasted in the mines, My Lady. He is wasted at the castle. Only consider, My Lady, what is such a man fit for? First, childhood as a portside ragamuffin, then his youth as a mine slave, followed by a few months skulking in the shadows

at the Court of Eagles—where, apparently, he still was not able to keep completely out of sight. That is an erratic education to say the least. I can think of no place where he could put it to use. Return him to the mines now, My Lady. Not as a slave, if that troubles you. Make him a free overseer. That is still more than he might ever have hoped for six months ago."

The bars dripped.

Myrgot pondered.

Jahor picked up a carefully crafted astrolabe from the desk, ran a long forenail over its calibrations, then rubbed his thumb across the curlicues of the rhet.

The Vizerine said: "No. I do not think that I will do that, Jahor. It is too close to slavery." She turned from the window and thought about her cook. "I shall do something else with him."

"I would put him back in the mines without his freedom," Jahor said sullenly. "But then, My Lady is almost as generous as the Empress herself. And as just."

The Vizerine raised an eyebrow at what she considered an ill-put compliment. But then, of course, Jahor did not know the Empress's most recent message that Gorgik had so dutifully delivered. "No. I have another idea for him. . . ."

"To the mines with him, My Lady, and you will save yourself much trouble, if not grief."

Had Gorgik known of the argument that was progressing in the Vizerine's chamber, he would most probably have misassigned the positions of the respective advocates—perhaps the strongest sign of his unfitness for court life.

Though it does not explain the actual assignment of the positions themselves, there was a simple reason for the tones of voice in which the respective positions were argued: For the last three weeks the Vizerine's lover had been a lithe, seventeen-year-old with bitten nails and mad blue eyes, who would, someday, inherit the title of Suzerain of Strethi—though the land his parents owned, near the marshy Avila, was little more than a sizeable farm. And the youth, for all his coming title, was—in his manners and bearing—little more than a farmer's son. His passion was for horses, which he rode superbly. Indeed, he had careered, naked, on a black mount, about the Vizerine's caravan for an hour one moonlit night when, two months before, she had been to visit the Avila province to meet with its reigning families anent taxes. She had sent Jahor to ascertain how she might meet this fiery youth.

A guest of his parents one evening, she discovered that they were quite anxious for him to go to Court and that for one so young he had an impressive list of illegitimate children throughout the surrounding neighborhoods and was something of a bane to his kin. She had agreed to take him with her; and had kept her agreement. But the relationship was of the volatile and explosive sort that made her, from time to time, look back with fondness on the weeks with Gorgik. Four times now the Suzerain-apparent had run up atrocious debts gambling with the servants, twice he had tried to blackmail her, and had been unfaithful to her with

at least three palace serving women, and what's more they were *not* of Lord Aldamir's circle. The night before the Vizerine had departed on this her most recent mission—to get away from the child? but no—they had gotten into an incredible argument over a white gold chain which had ended with his declaring he would never let her withered lips and wrinkled paws defile his strong, lithe body again. But just last night, however, hours before her return, he had ridden out to meet her caravan, charged into her tent, and declared he could not live without her caress another moment.

In short, that small sector of Myrgot's life she set aside for personal involvement was currently full to overflowing. (Jahor currently had no lover at all, nor was he overfond of the Vizerine's.) The Vizerine, in deference to the vaguest of promises to his parents, had been desultorily attempting to secure a small commission for the youth with some garrison in a safer part of the Empire. She knew he was too young for such a post, and of an impossible temperament to fulfill it, even were he half a dozen years older; also, there was really no way, in those days, to ascertain if any part of the Empire would remain safe. In any open combat, the little fool—for he was a fool, she did not delude herself in that—would probably be killed, and more than likely get any man under him killed as well—if his men did not turn and kill him first. (She had known such things to happen.) This young, unlettered nobleman was the sort who, for all his good looks, fiery temperament, and coming inheritance, one either loved or despised. And she had discovered, upon making inquiries into the gambling affair, much to her surprise, that no one in Court other than her self seemed to love him in the least. Well, she still did not want him to leave the Court—not just now. She had only put any effort toward obtaining him a commission at those moments when she had been most aware that soon she must want him as far away as possible.

The commission had arrived while she had been away; it was on her desk now.

No, after his marvelous ride last night to meet her, she did *not* want him to leave . . . just yet. But she was experienced enough to know those wishes that he would, with such as he, must come again. As would other commissions.

"Gorgik," she said, when Jahor had led him in and retired, "I am going to put you for six weeks with Master Narbu; he trains all of Curly's personal troops and has instructed many of the finest generals of this Empire in the arts of war. Most of the young men there will be two or three years younger than you, but that may as easily, at your age, be as much an advantage as a hindrance. At the end of that time, you will be put in charge of a small garrison near the edge of the K'haki desert—north of the Falthus. At the termination of your commission you will have the freedom in fact that, as of this morning, you now have on paper. I hope you will distinguish yourself in the name of the Empress, who is wise and wondrous." She



smiled. "Will you agree that this now terminates any and all of our mutual obligations?"

"You are very generous, My Lady," Gorgik said, almost as flabbergasted as when he'd discovered himself purchased from the mines.

"Our Empress is just and generous," the Vizerine said, almost as if correcting him. "I am merely soft-hearted." Her hand had strayed to the astrolabe. Suddenly she picked up the verdigris-colored disk, turned it over, frowned at it. "Here, take this. Go on. Take it, keep it, and take with it one final piece of advice. It's heartfelt advice, my young friend. I want you always to remember the Empress's words to you last night. *Do* you promise? Good—and as you value your freedom and your life, never set foot on the Garth peninsula. And if the Vygermagx Monastery ever thrusts so much as the tiny tip of one tall tower over the horizon of tree-tops within the circle of your vision, you will turn yourself directly around and ride, run, crawl away as fast and as far as you can go. Now take it—take it, go on. And go."

With the Vizerine's verdigris astrolabe in his hand, Gorgik touched his forehead and backed, frowning, from the chamber.

"My Lady, his education is already erratic enough. By making him an officer, you do not bring it to heel. It will only give him presumptions, which will bring *him* grief, and *you* embarrassment."

"Perhaps, Jahor. Then again, perhaps not. We shall see."

Outside the window, the rains, which, after having let up for the space of an hour's sunlight, blew violently again, clouding the far towers and splattering all the way in to the edge of the stone sill, running down the inner wall to the floor.

"My Lady, wasn't there an astrolabe here on your desk earlier this morning . . . ?"

"Was there now . . . ? Ah yes. My pesky little blue-eyed devil was in here only moments ago, picking at it. No doubt he pocketed it on his way down to the stables. Really, Jahor, I *must* do something about that gold-haired little tyrant. He has become the bane of my life. . . ."

Six weeks is long enough for a man to learn to enjoy himself on a horse; it is not long enough to learn to ride.

Six weeks is long enough for a man to learn the rules and forms of fencing; it is not long enough to become a swordsman.

Master Narbu, born a slave himself to a high household in the eastern hills of the Faltha not far from fabled Ellamon, had as a child shown some animal grace that his baronial owner thought best turned to weapon wielding—from a sort of retrograde, baronial caprice. Naturally slaves were not encouraged to excel in arms. Narbu had taken the opportunity to practice—from the retrograde despair of servitude—constantly, continuously, dawn, noon, night, and any spare moment between. At first the hope had

been, naturally and secretly and obviously to any but such a capricious master, for escape. Skill had become craft and craft had become art; and developing along with these was an impassioned love for weaponry itself.

The Baron displayed the young slave's skill to friends; mock contests were arranged, then real contests—with other slaves, with freemen. Lords of the Realm proud of their own skills challenged him; two Lords of the Realm died. And Narbu found himself in this paradoxical position: His license to sink sword blade into an aristocratic gut was only vouchsafed by the protection of an aristocrat. During several provincial skirmishes, Narbu fought valiantly beside his master. In several others, his master rented him out as a mercenary—by now his reputation (though he was not out of his twenties) was such that he was being urged, pressed, forced to learn the larger organizational skills and strategies that make war possible.

One can not truly trace the course of a life in a thousand pages. Let us have the reticence here not to attempt it in a thousand words. Twenty years later, during one of the many battles that resulted in the ascension of the present Child Empress Ynelgo to the Throne of Eagles, Narbu (now forty-four) and his master had been lucky enough to be on the winning side—though his master was killed. But Narbu had distinguished himself. As a reward—for the Empress was brave and benevolent—Narbu was given his freedom and offered a position as instructor of the Empress's own guard, a job which involved training the sons of favored aristocrats in the finer (and grosser) points of battle.

(Two of Narbu's earliest instructors had been daughters of the mysterious Western Crevasse, and much of his early finesse had been gained from these masked women with their strange and strangely sinister blades. Twice he had fought with such women, and once against them. But they did not venture in large groups too far from their own lush lands. Still, he had always suspected that Neveryon, with its strictly male armies, was overcompensating for something.)

In his position as Royal Master at Arms, he found himself developing a rich and ritual tirade against his new pupils: They were soft, or when they *were* hard they had no discipline, or, when they *had* discipline, had no heart. What training they'd gotten must all be undone before they could really begin; aristocrats could never make good soldiers anyway; what was needed was good, common stock. Though Master Narbu was common stock, had fought common stock, and been taught by common stock, Gorgik was the first man of common stock Master Narbu, in six years, had ever been paid to teach. And the good master had discovered that, as a teacher, somehow he had never developed a language to instruct any other than aristocrats—however badly trained, undisciplined, or heartless. As well, he found himself actually resenting this great-muscled, affable, quiet giant of a youth. First, his physique was not the sort (as Narbu was quick to point out

to him) that naturally lent itself to horsemanship or any but gross combative skills. Besides, the rumor had gone the rounds that the youth had been put under Narbu's tutelage not even because of his exceptional strength, but because he was some high court lady's catamite.

But one morning, Master Narbu woke, frowned at some sound outside, and sat up on his pallet: Through the bars on his window, he looked out across the yard where the training dummies and exercise forms stood in moonlight—it was over an hour to sunup. On the porch of the student barracks, beneath the frayed thatch, a great form, naked and crossed with shadow from the nearest porch poles, moved and turned and moved.

The new pupil was practicing. First he would try a few swings with the light wooden sword to develop form—moving slowly, returning to starting position, hefting the blade again. And going through the swing, parry, recovery—a little too self-consciously; and the arm not fully extended at the peak of the swing, the blade a little too high. . . . Narbu frowned. The new student put down the wooden blade against the barrack wall, picked up the treble-weight iron blade used to improve strength: Swing, parry, recovery; again, swing, parry—the student halted, stepped back, began again. Good. He'd remembered his extension this time. Better, Narbu reflected. Better . . . but not excellent. Of course, for the weighted blade, it was better than most of the youths—with those great sacks of muscle about his bones, really not so surprising. . . . No, he didn't let the blade sag. But what was he doing up this early anyway . . . ?

Then Narbu saw something.

Narbu squinted a little to make sure he saw it.

What he saw was something he could not have named himself, either to baron or commoner. Indeed, we may have trouble describing it: He saw a concentration in this extremely strong, naked young man's practicing that, by so many little twists and sets of the body, flicks of the eye, bearings of the arms and hips, signed its origins in inspiration. He saw something that much resembled not a younger Narbu, but something that had been of the younger Narbu and which, when he recognized it now, he realized was all-important. The others, Narbu thought (and his lips, set about with grey stubble, shaped the words), were too pampered, too soft . . . how many hours before sunrise? Not those others, no, not on your . . . that one, yes, was good common stock.

Narbu lay back down.

No, this common, one-time mercenary slave still did not know how to speak to a common one-time pit-slave as a teacher; and no, six weeks were *not* enough. But now, in the practice sessions, and sometimes in the rest periods during and after them, Narbu began to say things to the tall, scar-faced youth: 'In rocky terrain, look for a rider who holds one rein up near his beast's ear, with his thumb tucked well down; he'll be a Narmisman and the one to



show you how to coax most from your mount in the mountains. Stick by him and watch him fast. . . ."

And: "The best men with throwing weapons I've ever seen are the desert Adami: shy men, with little brass wires sewn up around the backs of one ear. You'll be lucky if you have a few in your garrison. Get one of them to practice with you, and you might learn something. . . ." Or: "When you requisition cart oxen in the Baleron swamp lands, if you get them from the Men of the Hide Shields, you must get one of them to drive, for it will be a good beast, but nervous. If you get a beast from the Men of the Palm Fiber Shields, then any one in your garrison can drive it—they train them differently, but just how I am not sure."

Narbu said these things and many others. His saws cut through to where and how and what one might need to learn beyond those six weeks. They came out in no organized manner. But there were many of them. Gorgik remembered many; and he forgot many. Some of those he forgot would have saved him much time and trouble in the coming years. Some that he remembered he never got an opportunity to use. But even more than the practice and the instruction (and because he practiced most, at the end of the six weeks he was easily the best in his class), this was the education he took with him. And Myrgot was away from the castle when his commission came. . . .



There was an oxcart ride along a narrow road with mountains looking over the trees to the left; with six other young officers, he forded an icy stream, up to his waist in foam; a horse-ride over bare rocks, around steep slopes of slate . . . ahead were the little tongues of army campfires, a-lick on the blue, with the desert below, white as milk in quartierlight.

Gorgik took over his garrison with an advantage over most: five years' experience in the mines as a foreman over fifty slaves.

His garrison contained only twenty-nine.

Nor were they despairing, unskilled, and purchased for life—though, over the next few years, from time to time Gorgik wondered just how much difference that made in the daily texture of their lives, for soldiers' lives were rough in those days. Over those same years, Gorgik became a good officer. He gained the affection of his men, mainly by keeping them alive in an epoch in which one of the horrors of war was that every time more than ten garrisons were brought together, twenty percent were lost through communicable diseases having nothing to do with battle. Much of Gorgik's knowledge of cures could be traced back to some of Master Narbu's more eccentric saws concerning various herbs, moldy fruit rinds, and moss, and not a few of Baron Curly's observations on botany that Gorgik found himself now and again recalling to great effect.

As regards the army itself, Gorgik was a man recently

enough blessed with an unexpected hope of life; all the human energy expended to create an institution solely bent on smashing that hope seemed arbitrary and absurd enough to marshal all his intelligence toward surviving it. He saw battle as a test to be endured, with true freedom as prize. He had experienced leading of a sort before and led well. But the personalities of his men—both their blustering camaraderie (which seemed a pale and farcical shadow of the explosions of brutal and destructive mayhem that, from time to time, had broken out in the slave quarters at the mines, always leaving three or four dead) and the constant resignation to danger and death (that any sane slave would have been trying his utmost to avoid) both confused him (and confusion he had traditionally dealt with by silence) and depressed him (and depression, frankly, he had never really had time to deal with, nor did he really here, so that its effects, finally, were basically just more anecdotes for later years on the stupidity of the military mind).

He knew all his men, and had a far easier relationship with them than most officers of that epoch. But only a very few did he ever consider friends, and then not for long. A frequent occurrence was that some young recruit would take the easiness of some late-night campfire talk, or the revelations that occurred on a foggy morning hike, as a sign of lasting intimacy, only to find himself reprimanded (and, in three cases over the two years, struck to the ground for the presumption: for these were brutal times), in a manner that recalled nothing so much (at least to Gorgik, eternally frustrated by having to indulge these reprimands) as the snubs he had received in the halls of the High Court of Eagles the mornings after some particularly revelatory exchange with some count or princess.

Couldn't these imbeciles learn?

He had.

The ones who stayed in his garrison did. And respected him for the lesson—loved him, some of them would even have said in the drunken evenings that, during some rare, lax periods, now at a village tavern, now at a mountain campsite where wine had been impounded from a passing caravan, still punctuated a soldier's life. Gorgik laughed at this. His own silent appraisal of the situation had been from the beginning: I may die; they may die; but if there is any way their death can delay mine, let theirs come first.

Yet within this strictly selfish ethical matrix, he was able to display enough lineaments both of reason and bravery to satisfy those above him in rank and those below—till, from time to time, especially in the face of rank cowardice (which he always tried to construe—and usually succeeded—as rank stupidity) in others, he could convince himself there might be something to the whole idea. 'Might'—for survival's sake he never allowed it to go any further.

He survived.

But such survival was a lonely business. After six months, out of loneliness, he hired a scribe to help him

compose a long letter to the Vizerine: inelegant, rambling, uncomfortable with its own discourse, wisely it touched neither on his affection for her nor his debt to her, but rather turned about what he had learned, had seen, had felt: the oddly depressed atmosphere of the marketplace in the town they had passed through the day before; the nature of the smuggling in that small port where, for two weeks now, they had been garrisoned; the gossip of the soldiers and prostitutes about the proposed public building about to replace a section of slumlike huts in a city to the north; the brazen look to the sky from a southern mountain path that he and his men had wandered on for two hours in the evening before stopping to camp.

At the High Court the Vizerine read his letter—several times, and with a fondness that, now all pretence at the erotic was gone, grew, rather than diminished, in directions it would have been harder for grosser souls to follow, much less appreciate. His letter contained this paragraph:

"Rumors came down among the lieutenants last week that all the garrisons hereabout were to be gone south for the Garth in a month. I drank wine with the Major, diced him for his bone-handled knives and won. Two garrisons were to go the Able-aini, in the swamps east of the Faltha—a thankless position, putting down small squabbles for ungrateful lords, he assured me, more dangerous and less interesting than the south. I gave him back his knives. He scratched his grey beard in which one or two rough red hairs still twist, and gave me his promise of the Faltha post, thinking me mad."

The Vizerine read it, at dawn, standing by the barred windows (dripping with light rain as they had dripped on the morning of her last interview with Gorgik, half a year before), remembered him, looked back toward her desk where once a bronze astrolabe had lain among the parchments. A lamp flame wavered, threatened to go out, and steadied. She smiled.

Toward the end of Gorgik's three years (and the occasional, unmistakeable royal messenger and scribe who came to his tent to deliver Myrgot's brief and very formal acknowledgments and take back other messages from him did not hurt his reputation among his troops), when his garrison was moving back and forth at biweekly intervals, from the desert skirmishes near the Venara canyon to the comparatively calm hold of fabled Ellamon high in the Faltha range (where, like all tourists, Gorgik and his men went out to observe, from the white lime slopes, beyond the crags to the far corrals of the fabled flying beasts that scarred the evening sky with their exercises), he discovered that some of his men had been smuggling purses of salt from the desert to the mountains. He made no great issue of it; but he called in the man whom he suspected to be second in charge of the smuggling operation and told him he wished a share—a modest share—of the profits. With that share, he purchased three extra carts and four oxen to pull them; and with a daring that astonished his men (for

the Empress's royal inspectors were neither easy nor forgiving), on his last trek back—a week before his discharge—he brought three whole cartfuls of contraband salt, which he got through by turning off the main road, whereupon they were shortly met by what was obviously a ragged, private guard at the edge of private lands.

"Common soldiers may not trespass on the Hold of the Princess Elyne—!"

"Conduct me to Her Highness!" Gorgik announced, holding his hand up to halt his men.

After dark, he returned to them (with a memory of high fires in the dank, roofless hall; and the happy princess with her heavy, jeweled robes and her hair greasy and her fingers thin [and grubbier than his], taking his hard, cracked hands in hers and saying: "Oh, but you see what I've come home to? A bunch of hereditary heathens who think I am a Goddess, and cannot make proper conversation for five minutes. No, no, tell me again of the Vizerine's last letter. I don't care if you've told me twice before. Tell me again, for it's been over a year since I've heard anything at all from Court. And I long for their company, I long for it. All my stay there taught me was to be dissatisfied with this ancient, moldy pile. No, sit there, on that bench, and I will sit beside you. And have them bring us more mead and bread and meat. And you shall simply tell me again, friend Gorgik . . .") with leave for his men and his carts to pass through the lands; and thus he avoided Her Highness's customs inspectors.

A month after he left the army, some friendlier men of an intricately tattooed and scarred desert tribe gave him

some intricately worked copper vases. Provincial burghers in Arganini bought them from him for a price five times what he recalled, from his youth in the ports, such work was worth in civilized lands. From the mountain women of Ka'hesh (well below Ellamon) he purchased a load of the brown berry leaves which, when smoked, put one in a state more relaxed than wine—he was now almost a year beyond his release from the army—and transported it all the way to the Port of Sernese, where, in small quantities, he sold it to sailors on outgoing merchant ships. While he was there, a man who he had paid to help him told him of a warehouse whose back window was loose in which were stored a great number of. . . . But we could fill pages; let us compress both time and the word.

The basic education of Gorgik had been laid. Gorgik now was tall and great muscled, with a face (with its great scar) that looked no more than half a dozen years older than it had at twenty-one, a man comfortable with horses and sword, at home with slaves, thieves, soldiers, prostitutes, merchants, counts, and princesses; was—in his way and for his epoch—the optimum product of his civilization. The slave-mine, the Court, the army, the great ports and mountain holds, desert, field, and forest: Each of his civilization's institutions had contributed to creating this scar-faced giant, who wore thick furs in cold weather and in the heat went naked (save for a layered disk of metal, with arcane etchings and cut-outs upon it—an astrolabe—chained around his veined and heavy neck, whatever the month), an easy man in company yet able to hold his silence. For the civilization in which he lived he was a civilized man.



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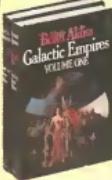
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